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FIGHTING FRONTIER EPIC

by TALMAGE POWELL

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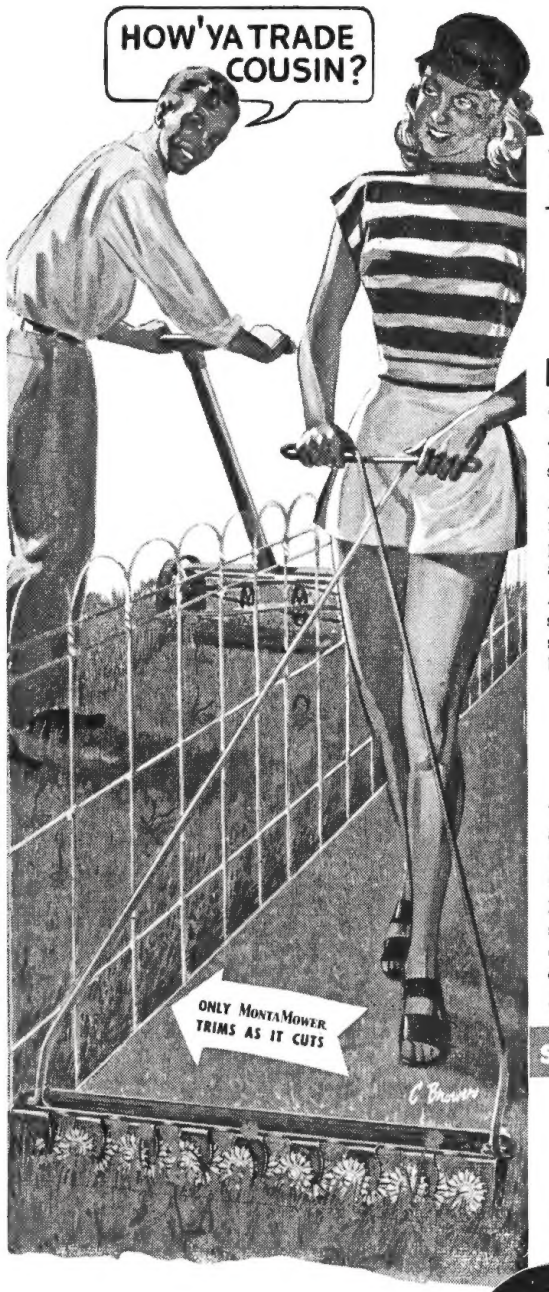

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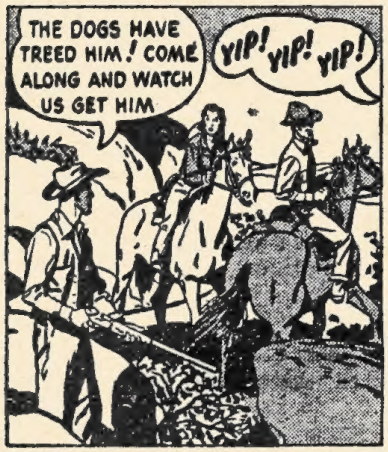

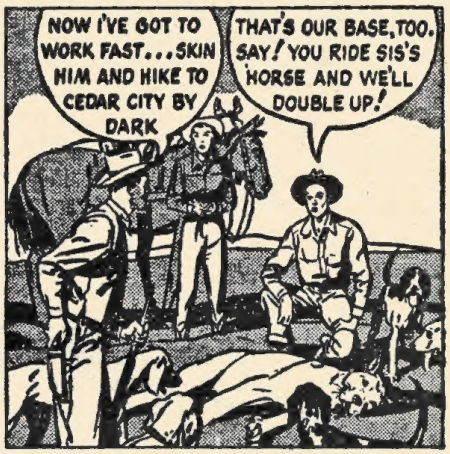

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GIRL FOR A GUNSMOKE TEXAN.....*Talmage Powell* **8**

Even across the Great Divide the rough-tough killers of Cocomino range couldn't savvy why Death's eyes were shining—and the ramrod of Boothill wore skirts. . . .

COLD-DECK THAT TINHORN TEMPTRESS!...*E. Hoffmann Price* **90**

Jim Hobson didn't know it, but his beautiful green-eyed gambling partner had orders from the Devil to cold-deck him to a deep, hot hell—with his own pack of cards!

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For the first—and last—time in his great career, the Baron of Tres Alamos licked the dust from the boots of the toughest hombre on the toughest range this side of perdition. . . .

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When the flame-haired queen of Hell's Gardens sighted the muleskinner king, she reckoned it a mite better to cool off—than kick off!

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Estes Hammond could hand over his hide, or fight—against odds of eighteen to three. . . .

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NEXT ISSUE **OUT JULY 20!**

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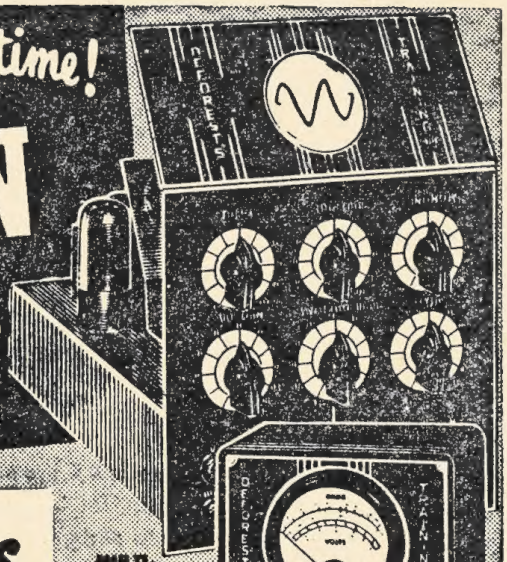

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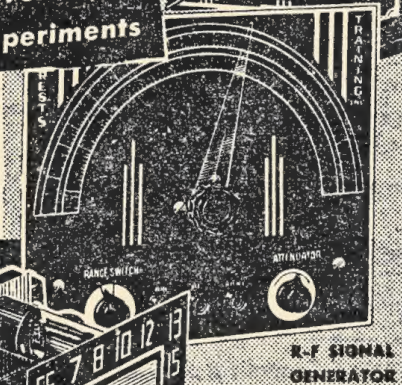

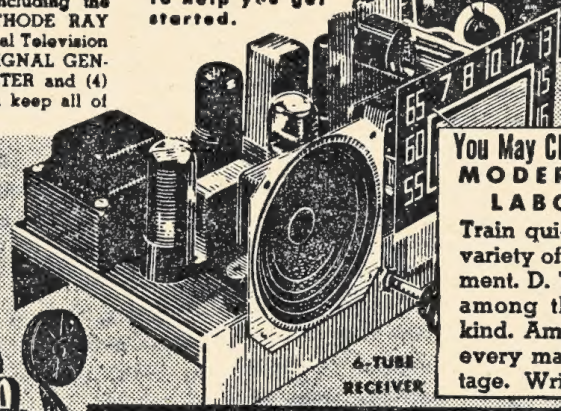

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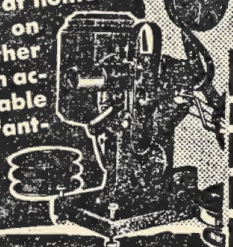

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• • •

For A Western: "Stampede" with Rod Cameron, Gale Storm, Don Castle and Johnny Mack Brown (Allied Artists).

A dam on the ranch of Tim and Mike McCall (Don Castle and Rod Cameron) is cutting off the water supply from the grazing land of some new settlers. Connie (Gale Storm), one of the settlers' daughters, tries unsuccessfully to get them to open the dam but only succeeds in infatuating Tim. He is killed protecting the dam from dynamiting. On a second attempt to destroy the dam, the settlers stampede the McCall cattle. Mike McCall loses the cattle but saves the dam after a vicious gun fight. Mike makes everything right in the end with Connie and the settlers. *Some inevitable aspects of a "Western"—cows, cowpokes, settlers—but a rootin' tootin' film.*

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For Sports: "Champion" with Kirk Douglas, Marilyn Maxwell and Arthur Kennedy (United Artists).

Through crafty managing and put-up fights, Midge Kelly (Kirk Douglas) rises from a down-and-outer to a championship contender. Because he can't make any time with his opponent's flashy girl friend (Marilyn Maxwell), Midge wins a fight "the syndicate" wanted him to throw. For this, Midge is hailed as a symbol of clean sportsmanship by the newspapers, but outside the ring he continues as a ruthless character hurting all those who stand in his way—including four women, his manager and his crippled brother (Arthur Kennedy). To the very end, when he dies after winning the championship, the public only knows him as a great champion—"a credit to the fight game." *Ring Lardner's great prize fight story is told with force and realism.*

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For Mystery: "Lust for Gold" with Ida Lupino and Glenn Ford (Columbia).

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For Adventure: "Scott of the Antarctic" with John Mills, Derek Bond, Harold Warender, James Justice and Reginald Beckwith (Eagle-Lion). Technicolor.

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GIRL FOR A GUNSMOKE TEXAN

Thrilling Frontier Novel

By Talmage Powell

There were no curses, no outcries, only the sickening *splat* of fists.

Mason ruled his cattle kingdom with bruising fists; Iverson, the gambler, ruled his with guns, and Colonel Testerman with man-destroying gold . . . but the fabulously lovely hellcat, Elena, who some called daughter of the devil, ruled them all. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Cursed Heritage

There are things, say the sages, that make men closer than brothers. When sweat has mingled with sweat, blood with blood, when two men's hearts have beat the same tempo of pain, when they have walked under the shadows of death together and through the baptism of war, then men may be closer than brothers. They know each other as no other men know them, as even their own mothers have never known them. And yet, knowing each other so well, they are strangers; for all men are strangers, each man an island unto himself, an island composed of loneliness and dreams and never-ending hope, and as water separates the islands, so a gulf separates every man from his brother . . . This, then, is the tale men tell of Sundown Iverson and John Mason, who were closer than brothers, two men who looked upon the girl Elena. . . .

IN THE early night the three riders shook the Mexicans and reached Fannin creek. Two of the riders were young men, barely out of their teens, but

seasoned, gaunt and hard, with trail dust and beard stubble heavy upon them. The third man was little and old with a disposition like vinegar seasoned with pepper. But at this moment his disposition was not expressing itself. He was bleeding to death in the saddle.

The waters of the creek were yellow gray in the dusk, but there was a concealing wall of brush along the creek, and a clump of cottonwoods sheltering a grassy stretch that reached down to the creek's muddy edge. Here on the grassy stretch with the lowering night sky for a roof, Sundown Iverson and John Mason laid little old Nichol Rudeen out to die. He groaned as they eased him from the saddle and laid him on the grass with a rolled blanket under his head. The fact that old Nichol cussed none nor had any acid comments to offer on the situation was proof that he was already nearer dead than living.

Sundown Iverson went down to the creek, filled his dusty hat with water, and came back and bathed the gray face. Old Nichol's breath was wheezing in his sunken, gray cheeks. His glazing eyes stared hard at the vast Texas sky, as if he wanted the sight of a star to take into eternity with him.

Iverson's hands were gentle as a woman's. It had been a hellish piece of ill luck, he thought grimly. The Mexican war was over, but here was a man still dying for Texas. They'd bumped into that roving, isolated band of Mexicans, remains of some shattered and forgotten company of cavalry, gaunt, hungry, hunted men who'd turned into wolves. The Americans had got away, but old Nichol had taken a slug square in the wishbone. The slug was rattling around in the old lungs now, in a way that caused Iverson's blood to run slow and chill.

"Easy, old-timer." Iverson's voice was thick. This old cougar, Iverson, and John Mason had rotated together as men come together only in war. They'd fought out half the war together, slogged through rain, bared their lives softly over flickering campfires. They'd made plans, too, that had included old Nichol's ranch, the Plugged Nichol, up in the Territory. They'd been headed for that spread, pushing hard because the old man was bad worried about the Plugged Nichol when they'd bumped into that band of renegade cut-throats.

JOHN MASON tilted a canteen to old Nichol's slack lips. John Mason was like a solid oak barrel, balanced on matchsticks. His square face was topped with reddish, short hair; his eyes were like slate. He was as unbending, uncompromising as a bulldog with the honesty of a man of the soil.

Iverson often thought it strange that a bond should arise between him and John Mason, because Iverson knew they were opposites. Iverson feared neither man nor the devil. His slim, wiry frame had the grace of a young thoroughbred steed limned against the dawn. He was a wanderer looking for a card game or a woman with stars in her eyes and flame in her veins. There was something about his face that caused brutal, low men to hate him at sight, but to be wary of how they trod in his presence.

Nichol Rudeen groaned, "Roll me a quirly, Sundown."

Iverson rolled the smoke, lighted it, thrust it between the quivering, parched lips. The old man was enduring a racking chill, and John Mason spread a blanket over him, tucking it in tight about him.

Old Nichol's attempt at a chuckle was a mucous rattle. "I can't kick, lads. I've lived 'er full and enjoyed every minute. Allus wanted to be in a big show, and I figure I was. Glad me and Sam Houston whupped 'em with the help of you lads."

A star peeped out overhead. Nichol let the limp cigarette fall from his lips and

grinned at the star. There was a bright fever in his eyes, that terrible clarity that comes sometimes in the moments that usher in death.

"Looks like I'm on top of Boothill without being able to walk back. Them damn cut-throat renegades! Left my spread in keeping of my brother. Expectant they call him, 'cause he allus expected to find gold. Spent his life hunting the yaller stuff. The weather and the toil finally made him a mite too gimpy to hunt longer or carry a gun when I went to j'ine Sam Houston. I get word that my brother has been shot by some dirty varmint, set out to make things right at the Plugged Nichol —and we hit them renegades!

"It's up to you now, the plans we had. Don't know what you'll find up there. Mighty purty country up in the Tontos. Guess rustlers has been hitting the stock . . . place must be run down. But take 'er, lads, and let 'er be known as the Plugged Nichol always. Let 'er be my monument!"

The old man stopped, wheezing for breath. Then he bit out, "John Mason!"

"Yes, Rudeen?"

"Write 'er down! Make 'er legal. I got nobody left, and I want you and Sundown Iverson to have that spread. Write 'er up, John!"

Mason had a stubby pencil. He wrote on the back of a limp, grimy old envelope in the moonlight. When he was through, Nichol Rudeen reared up to sign it. Nichol's breathing in that moment was like the rattle of clods on a coffin. He scrawled his name, sagged back. He tried to speak again, but couldn't. He grinned, as peppery as he ever had in life, and died that way. Iverson knew the moment it happened, because the grin became a frozen thing on the leathery face and the light turned off in Nichol's eyes.

Iverson and John Mason sat hunkered a moment longer. Then they both rose. They took off their hats, bowed their heads, and were silent. When Mason raised his head, Iverson went over to his saddle pack, got the short-handled shovel and began digging. When he was knee-deep, Iverson paused to catch a breath. He lifted his face to catch the cooling wind, and saw up there the full moon, and it looked strange. A small, black dot of angry cloud had settled on the face of the moon, and to Iverson it looked like a shiny nickel with a hole plugged in it was hanging up in the black, inverted bowl of sky.

* * *

Sundown Iverson first saw her with the sun in her face. She was like the still-hush of a painting, bare-legged, bare-armed, the whole of the vast, rolling Tontos country, lush in its summer green, behind her. She was crouched beside a bright stream, washing clothes on the smooth stones in the shallow water the way Mexican women washed them. But there was nothing of the Mexican about her; in the loose calico skirt and muslin blouse, her body looked firm, lithe, and quick; her hair was like the bright copper of a new penny, and her eyes were as green as the sea. A man could look into those eyes and lose himself.

She rose as Iverson and Mason rode forward, and stood beside the stream, the breeze rustling her hair about her face, like a woman grateful for her face, her clouds of hair, and the slow, liquid mystery of her green eyes.

Iverson felt excitement mount in his veins as he looked at her. She was Elena Benton, he knew. And he knew more, too, in that first glance he had of her. He read things in her eyes, in the thrust-back tilt of her shoulders, in the full, red lushness of her mouth. Somehow she called to his mind the flame flowers that unaccountably bloom in the dead ashes of extinct volcano craters. She was a flower all right . . . a dangerous one.

IVERSON let his thoughts drift back, to the long trail up from old Nichol Rudeen's grave. Over the San Juan he and Mason had come, up through the endless, wind-swept stretches of the Palos Duro country. Mason had been his silent self always, a man of deep, unswerving currents. Together they had sucked moisture out of near-dry buffalo wallows, lived on game, scrubbed their bodies down with the last of Mason's bar of yellow soap in the Sandell. The war with Mexico and old Nichol's grave were a long way off. And then one day, the end of the trail, the vastness of the Tontos country bursting before their vision. And John Mason had looked upon the endless, majestic sweep of mountains and lush green valleys and the currents had stirred deep, reflected on his face: "An empire! A man could build an empire here!"

Now Iverson was looking at Mason's face again. From the face of Elena Benton to the face of Mason, and the currents were on the move. Mason was looking at her as if he had never been conscious of the blessing of vision before.

Iverson looked at the girl. She met his gaze, a sullen challenge flicking to life in her eyes. First time I ever laid eyes on her, Iverson thought, but she knows I can read her, so somehow we're not exactly strangers, this Elena Benton and me. He quirked his lips, sat back in the saddle and built himself a cigarette.

John Mason cleared his throat. "Miss Benton?"

She came up the slope from the creek toward them, Mason watching every movement of her walk. She said, "You are Iverson and Mason, the new owners of the Plugged Nichol."

"Yes," Mason said. "We'd like to see your father."

"He's in the house."

"Thank you," Mason said. "Since we're neighbors, ma'am, I hope we have the pleasure of seeing you often."

He wheeled his horse quickly. Iverson's movement was more deliberate. The girl watched them move down the trail, sunlight catching in a gleam in her narrowed green eyes.

The Benton ranchhouse came into view around a bend in the trail. It was a mud brick and frame building, the hybrid house of a greasy sack rancher. There was rubble on the hard, bare earth of the yard, and everywhere Iverson could read signs of grinding, bitter poverty.

Iverson and Mason reined up in the yard. The sagging, rough-plank door of the house was pulled back on its leather hinges. A young man was framed in the doorway. He was lean to the point of gauntness, with a tense, whisker-stubbled face, and tense dark eyes; his coarse, sandy hair spilled low on his neck. There was no welcome in his face, none in his voice: "What do you want?"

"You're Lenny Benton?"

"That's what they call me."

Her half-brother, Iverson thought, recalling things he'd heard about the Bentons. One difference between Lenny and a rattler, a gossip in town had told him, the rattler would give warning. Lenny would shoot you in the back.

Iverson looked at the six-shooter thong-tied on Lenny's left thigh. "Call your pa, Mr. Benton," Iverson said, holding his horse in tight rein, his hand close to his gun.

"Why should I?"

"Because we're the new bosses of the Plugged Nichol. We've come to fetch our cows back."

Lenny said, "Pa!" When there was no answer, he turned, entered the house. Iverson heard him say from in there, "Wake up! You damned old sot, get the likker out of your head and get out here!"

THERE was a groan, a splashing of water back in the lean-to kitchen, and then an old man came to the door. He

was huge and spare, a great gaunt skeleton that had once held much flesh. His tousled gray hair was thinning; his sunken cheeks accented the long, bare line of his jaw. There were cracks in his swollen, liquor-burned lips, loose pouches under his eyes. His shoulders were hunched against a hang-over chill.

"If you're Sam Benton, and I take it you are," John Mason said coldly, "we've come over here for Plugged Nichol cattle."

"You talking about them cows in my north pasture?"

Mason nodded. Iverson was letting his partner make the play, but keeping his gaze peeled on the shadows beyond old Sam Benton, in the house. He could see Lenny's tense face hanging back there in the gloom.

"Them cows wandered over on my range," Sam Benton said. "Nobody on the Plugged Nichol. Cowboys had all drifted after gimpy old Expectant Rudeen was shot to death."

"Then you won't mind us hazing the critters back to Plugged Nichol range," Mason said. "We've been here a week now, me and my partner, and—"

"We heard all about you," Benton said slowly.

Lenny's voice piped from the gloom of the house. "I heard talk that a couple men mighta shot old Nichol Rudeen for his Plugged Nichol. Mighty funny, Meskins doing it!"

Mason said, "Sam Benton, you'd better teach that boy to keep a civil tongue in his head!"

Benton passed his hand across his face, letting his eyes drop. "I'll caution him," he said wearily.

Iverson and Mason turned, rode out of the yard. As they topped the rise, they saw Elena Benton coming up from the creek. Her walk was a thing of liquid, smoldering grace, like some untamed creature of the wilds. She slowed as Mason reined his horse up, looked down at her.

Iverson saw his partner's face as Mason looked at the girl. There was a conflict in Mason's eyes. But the beauty of her and the fire in her overcame any thoughts of the weasel and the drunken hulk of man back there in the stinking greasy ranch-house. And John Mason said, "Drop over and see us any time, Miss Elena."

Her teeth flashed, even, perfect, white as a cat's. "I will. I'll be riding over to the Plugged Nichol." She was looking at Mason, but Iverson felt that disturbing vibration he'd felt the first instant their eyes had met, his and this girl's, and he had a feeling the words were a challenge meant for him. He spurred his horse forward, forcing Mason to catch up with him. There was a hint of color in Mason's face. "Dammit, Sundown, you didn't have to be rude to her! She can't help the kind of family she was born into."

"Is that what you think of her, John?"

"I think she's the most beautiful thing that ever came in range of my eyes," Mason said simply.

Iverson cut a quick glance at him, saw the seriousness in Mason's face. A frown crept between Iverson's brows.

* * *

Elena Benton watched them disappear over the rise. Her full lower lip was caught lightly between her teeth and her eyes were shimmering green with speculation. She laughed with soft insinuation to herself, and walked on down the slope to the house.

Her half-brother Lenny was standing in the doorway, brooding at the rise over which the two riders had disappeared. "They acted all-fired high and mighty! They come here again, I'll gun 'em down like a pair of dawgs!"

She raked him with her gaze and laughed, and went on into the house. The floor was earthen, the sheet iron stove

sagging. Old Sam Benton was at the bench across the room, bathing his face from a tin basin. He dried his face and looked at her.

"You she-wolf," he said thickly, "rustling Plugged Nichol beef was your idea. You used Lenny to do it."

Disdainful of him, she crossed to the stove, picked up a poker, and jabbed at near-dead embers.

Her contempt and silence brought a trembling to the old man's hands. "Didn't you hear me speak?" he roared. "You answer when I talk to you! You'd drag the Benton name through any kind of mud to get what you want, wouldn't you?"

He grabbed her arm, and her eyes turned to green flames. She tore out of his grasp. "You got a lot of room to talk about mud! The cows were there for the taking. What if I did talk Lenny into getting them? You think I like it here? It was a way of getting money enough to taste something besides this swill you bring in and call food!" She had a good tight grip on the poker, and a long pent-up rage burning in her face, daring Sam Benton to break her to his will. "You've never been a pa, Sam Benton. Not to me. But I don't need you. And I don't need the Benton name! It's seen mud enough so that I'd trade it for a little more mud any day of the week, if it was the kind of mud that would get me out of here!"

Sam was confused and startled and not a little frightened by the things he saw in her eyes. Some dim voice in his buzzing, liquor-tortured brain told him this was the showdown. Ever since she'd begun to flower into womanhood, this moment had been coming.

He fumbled for a piece of harness strap that hung on the wall. Then he glimpsed her wild, flaming face rising before him. Her chest strained, her teeth gleamed. As if he weren't worthy of the use of a weapon, she ignored the poker in her left hand and slapped him square across the mouth with her right. All her young strength was in the blow, and it reeled Sam back, brought a few drops of blood from his smashed lips.

He stood spread-legged, staring at nothing, unaware of the blood filming his yellow teeth, dripping on his chin. After a long time he realized dully that she had gone in the other room and that this laugh he was hearing was the echo of her laugh still ringing in the dark, deep corridors of his brain. He knew the girl Elena was a girl no longer, but a woman, and he was afraid, because she was a woman who knew no master.

CHAPTER TWO

Devil in Skirts

ANOTHER summer had come to the Tontos, and time had wrought its changes. Lenny Benton reined in his tired sorrel gelding among the huge boulders that littered the face of the high bluff. Lenny was trail-tired and eased back in the saddle. He turned his narrow, sullen gaze to the scene below him. It was vast, like a painting on a sweep of mighty canvas, valleys, hills, timbered slopes. The Tontos. Rich country, bisected by a meandering river that looked like a silver snake from this great distance. Cattle grazed on the slopes and here and there moved a black speck that Lenny knew to be a human being. And down in the hazy distance was the little string of dust that was the road winding up to the Plugged Nichol buildings.

Lenny's smile was thin as he looked at the Plugged Nichol hacienda, a doll-house the size of children's blocks gazing upon it from here. Lenny sneered his contempt. Those two had worked like fools, Mason and Iverson. One year ago they had come to the Tontos. They'd scraped a few hundred head of cows out of ravines and brush and built themselves a ranch.

Lenny turned the gelding. Word had filtered to him down in the sand hills country in the person of Tiny Harper. He'd bumped into Tiny in that saloon in Hyko, out beyond the fingertip reach of the law. They had stood drinks. Lenny had learned that Tiny was on the move because of an abortive attempt at stage robbery. Tiny had looked at his shot glass and said, "I heard about your trouble, Lenny. Wells Fargo has put a price on your head."

"Only they ain't bought my carcass yet."

"Heard about your old man, too. Bad that he up and died like he did."

"Drunk hisself silly." Lenny had fingered the bottle on the table between them. "While you was in the Tontos country, you hear anything about that half-sister of mine, Elena?"

"I reckon I did! Talk about the Plugged Nichol is all over the Tontos. Boy, your sis is marrying one of the owners!"

"Say that again!"

"It's what I heard, so help me. Some feller name of John Mason."

Lenny grinned. "You don't say," he said softly. "You don't say! Drink up, Tiny. There's a place I got to go, and I might as well get to riding."

Now as he turned his played out gelding from the bluffs overlooking the Plugged Nichol buildings, he laughed to himself. You had to hand her one thing. She was a spit-fire little hunk of the devil's daughter. She'd hated that stinking life with pa with a hate that was poison. But when she wanted something she could sure work at it. Lenny had seen from the bluffs that they were preparing for fiesta at the Plugged Nichol. Her wedding, hers and John Mason's. There'd be huge sides of barbecued beef, rivers of liquor, fiddles squealing and dancing feet stomping until they all fell down laughing and went to sleep where they fell.

And she had done it all on her own, Lenny thought. It struck him with amazement and awe. The odds had been stacked all against her. There had been John Mason's natural aversion to Lenny and old man Benton. And there had been Iverson, who would have tried to stand between her and Mason. But with a cunning born in her the way a she-wolf knows cunning before its eyes are open, she had hooked Mason, had convinced him that she was a sweet, rare, mis-treated, helpless flower blooming atop a dung heap.

Lenny came in sight of an old line shack fifty yards away. A side-saddled black mare stood beside the shack, blowing slightly. So she was here already. Lenny wiped his mouth with his hand, and started forward, fingers touching his gun. It was a growing obsession with him, this need of the feel of a Colt butt against his palm. He slept with his hand on his gun more and more often these days, slept with every nerve like the exploring feeler of a roach bug. The price on his head gave him the privilege of swaggering in towns like Hyko, but being on the dodge, hunted, had sapped him. Sometimes in the still, small hours when he felt most the loneliness and pressure of knowing every man was against him, a queer bitter exhaustion flooded over him in such a tide that he would bury his face in his long, nervous hands, and gag on dry sobs.

HE DISMOUNTED, approached the shack ahead with the silence of a puma. Easing his body around the jamb of the leather-hinged, plank door, he saw her pacing in the cabin, and he saw that she was alone.

"Hello, sis."

She turned and looked at him, not saying anything. Lenny looked her up and down. She was dressed in dark velvet, and she looked a lot different than she had when Lenny'd tucked his tail and run like a scared dog nine months ago. She was about the most beautiful woman he had

ever seen. He stepped in the shack. There were shadows in the one-windowed room, and the smell of earth and a stale fire. And the smell of her perfume, an insinuating jasmine scent. Lenny knew that John Mason had paid for it all, the dress, the sleek, black mare, the perfume.

She was still looking at him, and he flushed. He'd figured to play it cool, but there'd always been this way she had of cutting him with her green eyes. It made him want to slap some respect in her for the men-folk of her clan.

"You look quite the lady," he sneered.

Her eyes glinted, but her voice was soft, controlled. "You were a fool to send a message last night to the Plugged Nichol by that drunken old hostler from Cocomino town."

"Anyhow it brought you out here to meet me."

"Just to tell you to get back in the hole-in-the-wall country, if you value your skin."

Her words unsettled him for a moment. He licked his lips, searching her face with his gaze. A thought burst in his mind: Does she know that it was me killed old Expectant Rudeen? That he had a roll, that I didn't mean to kill him, but that I had to? Would she . . . But hell no, I covered my tracks on that one, I covered them good. Nobody knows, except me.

"I ain't going back to the hole-in-the-wall!" he said thickly. "They ain't never giving up, not Wells Fargo. Every gun in the country is hungry for me, for that bounty money. I can't stand any more of it without going crazy. I'm gonna lose my grip and some weasel will gun me down."

Lenny's breath rasped in the shack. "I got to get out before I go to pieces! It's been a good year for you, brought you to this, being all decked out in fine duds and a big wedding, but it's been a nightmare to me! I'd kill to stop it, but I can't kill all Wells Fargo. There's just one way I can end it—go to Frisco and get on a boat. When I land in South America I want a stake—and the money's coming from you!"

She looked at him a long time without answering. There were only the sounds of his breathing and the buzzing of a bottle fly in the shack. "I haven't any money, Lenny."

"You can get it!"

"Where?"

"From John Mason. I know what you're up to. I heard that Sundown Iverson has been on the trail for weeks with a big cattle drive. You're planning to have Mason a married man, planning for it to be too late for Iverson to do anything about it when he gets back. But it's going to cost you five thousand dollars to marry John Mason!"

"Five thou—" She threw back her head and laughed. "What makes you think you're worth that, Lenny? You'd better get out quick before I turn you in for bounty myself!"

"I ain't fearing that any! I know a few things, remember! I know who it really was that rustled Plugged Nichol beef while old gimpy Expectant Rudeen was looking after the place. One of them was a woman dressed in man's clothes. How do you think John Mason would like to know that about his lily flower!"

Her eyes glinted green light. "You'd gamble your own neck to get that word to Mason, Lenny?"

"I ain't got a damn' thing to lose! I can't go on the way I been. Anyhow, I wouldn't have to expose myself. There are ways a smart man could get that word to Mason."

"And you think," she whispered, "that I have so little power over Mason?"

"I've taken that into consideration," Lenny said. "I wouldn't be here if I wasn't pretty sure of myself. You ain't seen all my cards yet. You don't know it, but Iverson is getting back forty-eight hours sooner than he had planned. I

heard in Cocomino town that he'll hit Plugged Nichol range today. Hear that? Today! He's getting back from that trail drive before the wedding, sis!"

HE WATCHED her eyes and laughed. "That's hitting where you live, ain't it? You got plenty power over Mason—but you better realize I'm gambling whole hog or nothing. If I threw in with Iverson, if what I could tell Mason was coupled with Iverson's showing up before the wedding ever comes off. . . ."

She closed her eyes, and Lenny cringed, fearing the moment when she would open them. But no storm broke over his head. She moved to the door of the line shack, stood looking out over the vista of mountains and valleys.

"I reckon I know what you're thinking," Lenny said. "You're standing there thinking that John Mason will be cattle king of this country one day, if you have your way."

He watched her back. "It's a pretty high-powered dream for a gal off a greasy sack ranch, ain't it, sis?" She didn't move or speak. He said, "I didn't come back here just to make threats. You need me. Today is the day that counts. I've told you what'll happen if you don't get me five thousand dollars. But if you do, it'll be a good investment. I'll side you. I'll take out the only possible risk—" he paused, eyes glittering, licked his lips, and reminded himself that he was cornered, that this was his only hope. "—because you can't afford a single risk until Mason puts the ring on your finger. I'll rough up that Iverson that you hate so he won't be able to come crawling into the Plugged Nichol until at least tomorrow."

She said suddenly, "Five thousand is a lot. It'll take time. By sundown a week from today you'll find it buried behind this shack."

Then she left quickly, mounted the black mare, and rushed down the steep trail as if she were afraid of hearing an echo of the words she had just spoken . . .

Elena Benton stood by the window of her bedroom. It was open and the cool breeze of twilight came in to caress her face. Below her lay the wide, sweeping Plugged Nichol ranchyard; she had good view of it from this second story window. From here she could see the limitless reaches of the Tontos. Her gaze fell everywhere on Plugged Nichol range—and this was only a beginning.

A soft and mirthless smile played about her full lips. She enjoyed this hour, the hour just before triumph. Now let the stiff-necked ones tell their precious daughters to keep away from that Benton gal, that dirty little Benton gal who'd stood over a worn-out mother's grave and done a greasy sack woman's work at the age of ten!

The sinking sun was splashing crimson over the whole western sky, throwing a mantle of blood over the distant mountains. She stood there, letting it warm her flesh. Like the sun, her old life would fade away this night, and with the fresh coming of the sun, the new life would dawn, strong, vivid.

The yard below held little life. It was close to chow time. The preacher had already arrived, been ushered into the house downstairs. Neighbors had come like the gathering of a clan. The faint murmur of their presence drifted to her as she listened. They were talking, drinking downstairs. John Mason commanded respect here. He had proven himself a man. Determined, stubborn, not giving nor asking quarter. But the currents ran deep in him, and one of them was a tide of tenderness for the girl with green eyes. Elena laughed. It promised to be exciting, this task of turning the iron in Mason to putty. Time, she thought, give me time and I'll spread the Plugged Nichol brand over every inch of the Tontos. I'll be good for him, the making of him! He will do things

without ever knowing the decision wasn't his own. . . .

She walked slowly over to the closet and looked at the dresses hanging there. Mason had gone to great pains to order the material through Cocomino town merchants from Frisco, and Elena had endured the dullard Mexican woman-servant, heaping her abuses upon the woman's head until the dresses were made, just so. She had learned a lot in the past year, Elena decided. John Mason liked books. She had been hungry for the things in them. Mason had gently corrected her at table and in her talk. Somewhere in Mason's past there was breeding, a brand of soft, Southern culture, though he never spoke of his life before he came west.

Through it all, maddening as a heavy quirt to a sleek young mare, had been Sundown Iverson's knowing, mocking eyes. She remembered the talk she'd overheard when she'd first come here. "And what would you suggest, Sundown?" John Mason had demanded with a strange, new tone of impatience in his voice. "Her brother's on the run with a Wells Fargo price on his head. Her daddy's drunk himself to death. You couldn't leave a girl out on that greasy sack spread alone! Sure as hell burns, you couldn't do that to any girl!" And then, slowly: "Sundown, sometimes lately I have feelings I don't want to have. I thought I knew you. Fought a war with you, froze with you, bled with you—Well, let's not let anything come between us."

The homeless girl had stayed. A servant at first, a charity ward, a certain shyness about her, her heart in her eyes when she looked at John Mason. A knowledge in her heart that Mason was, after all, a mere man. . . .

Elena heard a sound behind her, at the doorway. She turned with a smile. But it was not Mason, and she went pale. She shrank back before the figure that walked toward her through the dying sunlight shafting in the window.

"Iverson!"

HE WAS gaunt and rawboned from his weeks on the trail. There was a pallor on his cheekbones. There was also a bullet hole in the crown of his dusty hat, and blood had dribbled down the side of his face. Elena gasped.

Iverson said, "Lenny was nervous. He laid for me in the rocks on Blind Bluff, overlooking the bend in the trail. He did everything exactly right—except make his first shot his last."

She couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight of his blood.

"Lenny is dead," he said. "I killed your brother. I left him in the hollow below Blind Bluff where I cornered him."

He came toward her. The wall was at her back. Her hands were at her sides, palms pressed back flat against the wall. A pulse hammered in her throat, and she looked past him wildly, as if seeking some way out of his presence.

"You haven't wasted time, have you?" he said. "In the weeks I've been on the trail, you finally landed John Mason. That makes you the victor, and sometimes in victory we hate all the more."

She saw his hand reaching toward her, but she could do nothing. His blood gleamed dully in the dying sun's rays, close to her. His touch sent a shiver through her.

He pulled her toward him. "You fool," he whispered, "don't you know why you've always hated me?"

He kissed her hard and full on the mouth. He smelled of trail dust, horse flesh, and sweat, and she could taste faintly the sweat brine on his lips. She fought him for a moment, like a firm-bodied young wildcat, but he wouldn't release her, and she found her arms crawling about his neck. She closed her eyes, and in her ears was sound like the wild, free winds

hammering through the passes of the Tontos.

Iverson released her. He was laughing at her without making sound, with a curl of his lips and with his eyes. It brought a flame to life behind her face. The taste of sudden, choking wrath corroded her throat. Then she chilled into rigidity as she saw the blocky, red-headed form of John Mason filling the open doorway.

Mason's face was a red blister. He pushed into the room, looking at Sundown Iverson. She moved toward Mason. "John . . ." the word sounded strangled in her throat. "John, I . . ."

Mason pushed her away, moved up before Iverson's half-mocking face, and slugged the taller man in the teeth.

Iverson crashed back into the tall wooden headboard of the bed. Mason followed in fast, his bared teeth catching light. He caught the open collar of Iverson's shirt, struck for the face with his other hand. Iverson kicked him in the groin, writhed up off the bed. They broke apart in the middle of the room, stood slugging, neither man giving ground.

Light faded and the room became a cave in which two savages fought. There were no curses, no outcries, only grunts of effort, the whistling of their breathing, the sickening *splat* of fists bruising flesh, the scrape and thump of booted feet against the floor.

Iverson fought John Mason back against the east wall of the room, snapping the shorter, heavier man's head back with quick, hard blows. Mason blew blood through his teeth, pulled his head into his shoulders, and began to ride Iverson back. In the middle of the room, he knocked Iverson down. Iverson reached the ankle of John Mason's boot. Mason crashed to the floor. They flailed each other, rolling. Breaking apart, they pushed themselves to their feet, stood crouching, blowing hard. Iverson's cheek was laid open, his left eye swollen. Mason's nose was smashed crooked and he was spitting blood. Through the blood, he said, "This range ain't big enough for the two of us now, Sundown. You're the gambler. Call it!"

John Mason fetched a silver dollar from his pocket, flipped it in the air. While the spinning coin was still ringing in the air from contact with Mason's thumbnail, Iverson said, "Tails."

The coin landed. John Mason looked at it, raised his red, bruised face to Iverson. "I'll give you ten seconds to get off my land!"

Iverson moved to the door. It, and the hallway beyond, swarmed with neighbors who'd come to the Plugged Nichol as guests, never expecting to hear a ruckus like the one that had attracted them upstairs.

Iverson stopped in the doorway, looked over his shoulder at Elena Benton. She met and understood the light in his eyes. Her fists knotted at her sides. Like poison in her throat, hate choked her. Iverson had done this deliberately, had come up here directly, knowing that Mason would see him, would rush up to wring his hand and speak to him after the long weeks on the trail. She watched Iverson disappear through the crowded hallway. She flashed her face to Mason and moved stiff lips that still burned with the memory of Iverson's kiss. "John . . ."

"I'll give you more consideration than I gave him," Mason said. "I'll give you *twenty* seconds to get off this range!"

* * *

Later one or two of John Mason's neighbors swore to their wives that they had seen him stalk out in the darkness, make a sound in his throat, and hurl something away from him with all his strength. The object gleamed a little in the night, and there were people who swore it was the cursed dollar that had turned the

Plugged Nichol into a one man ranch.

CHAPTER THREE

Bounty Money

COLONEL Eben Testerman stood at his office window, sipping Irish whiskey from a water tumbler, and idly watching the twisting, dusty main street of Cocomino town. He was alone in the quiet of his office. It was an office well appointed with leather chairs, a big mahogany desk, a case of books the colonel never bothered to read, shiny brass cuspidors, a hat tree, and plush drapes on the windows. It was by far the most elegant office in all of Cocomino, deservedly so, for it was the inner sanctum of the Cocomino bank, which the colonel owned. Beyond the office doorway now and then could be heard the mumble of talk as business was conducted in the bank.

The colonel smacked his lips over the whiskey. It was his boast that he never consumed less than a quart of Irish whiskey a day. His appetites gave the colonel a certain ruddiness of countenance and bleariness of eye. He had been seen to stagger once or twice even in the early morning, but as Tael Baxter, his cashier, took care of most of the bank's business, sobriety was not always required of the colonel.

He finished his glass of whiskey, coughed, and wiped his mouth with a linen handkerchief. Despite his drinking habits, he had none of the obesity usually associated with such men of the colonel's age. He still cut a trim figure, and there was a certain dash about his face. Hair white as driven snow, worn long, curling at the edges, and a neat, milk-white Vandyke beard lent him a distinguished air, heightened by the merciless, arrogant glint in his eyes.

The colonel was thinking of his birthday, which would occur two weeks from now. He would be fifty-four years old. Often he chuckled, "Born with the century, and by hell I'll die with her—given enough good Irish whiskey!"

The prospect of spending his next birthday in Cocomino did not lift him, even after the glass of whiskey. He craved some excitement, especially an exciting woman. He rated women even above Irish whiskey; the Cocomino saloons could import the whiskey, but there was a dearth of exciting women in the town.

Well, there was always Frisco. A long, hard, dusty trail on the stage, but Frisco made a vacation worthwhile. It was raw, tough, exciting, and the colonel considered it his kind of town.

He reached again for his Irish whiskey.

After he drank, he watched buckboards, buggies, horses, people moving along the solid, nailed boardwalk and crooked main street. It always delighted him to look out over the street in this way. His bank was built at the very hub of the town.

He saw Sundown Iverson step off the plank walk across the street, heading this way, it seemed. The colonel smiled thinly, brushing his fingers thoughtfully through his Vandyke. Iverson was getting out of his element these days, making a play for power. The country had developed to the point where it was only a question of time until the railroad came to Cocomino town. The colonel had taken it for granted that he and his bank would bring the R. H. & P. road up from the south. Now Iverson was trying to organize a company to bring the Central Pacific swinging down from the north. The colonel chuckled about it to his friends, called Iverson's efforts "the copper combine, the company financed by pennies." But he detected a false note when his friends laughed in agreement, and secretly he worried some about Sundown Iverson's effort, until in an Irish whiskey glow he convinced himself that no one could best the colonel Eben Testerman, much less a saloon pro-

prietor and gambler, which Iverson was. Always able to convince himself, his attitude was one similar to that a wise uncle has towards an upstart nephew.

The colonel knew Sundown Iverson's story fairly well. The man had fought in the Mexican war, which was ancient history now and almost a forgotten conflict, with new war clouds darkening in the east over slaveholder and abolitionist. Iverson had come north from that old war with John Mason, whose Plugged Nichol outfit had reached a crest two years ago. Too high a crest. Mason had over-reached, and today he was in hot water. There had been trouble between Mason and Iverson. Mason had got the Plugged Nichol, and in the dead of night Sundown Iverson had showed up in Cocomino with the dead body of an outlaw draped across his saddle. He had ridden to the home of the Wells Fargo agent, got the man out of bed, laid out the body of the outlaw on the pop-eyed agent's porch. "I understand there's bounty on this man," Iverson had said. "He tried to ambush me, but there was haze over his gun sight. Any way you figure it, I think I'm entitled to that bounty money, and I'm here to collect it."

Sundown Iverson had collected his bounty several days later. He had taken it to the Palace Saloon and Gambling Emporium, and four hours later he was worth nearly five thousand dollars. Brad Holcombe, who owned the Palace at that time, had watched the game from the beginning. When it was over, he offered Iverson a Panatella. "I want to hire you," Holcombe had said. "I want you here every night, behind that table—gambling for the house."

TWO years later Sundown Iverson had bought Holcombe out, and Holcombe had drifted on toward the Gold Coast.

A knock sounded on the colonel's office door. He called, "Come!" Sundown Iverson came slowly into the office.

The two men exchanged greetings. The colonel proffered Irish whiskey, which Iverson refused with a polite shake of his head.

"How is the copper combine, Iverson?"

"Still collecting its pennies."

The colonel Eben Testerman chuckled. "You'll never get the Central Pacific into Cocomino. You'll burn your financial fingers when I bring the R. H. and P. road in."

Iverson smiled and said nothing. There was a surface friendliness in the railroad rivalry, but an undercurrent that was not so friendly, that was very far from being friendly.

Iverson strolled over to the window, pushed the drape back. Thoughts of the road faded from his mind. There was a loneliness in him today; the past years in Cocomino had left a bitter emptiness in his mind. He had kept himself acutely busy, doing nothing real or important, since the night, so many dim years ago, when he'd kissed a wanton woman and bruised the flesh of John Mason with his fists. For a moment he remembered her as she'd been that night, the green fires of hell flashing in her eyes, daring, challenging. He wondered if men weren't often fools . . . He shook his head shortly as if shaking thoughts from the cobwebbing of his brain.

He sensed the colonel's gaze on his back. He said, "I understand John Mason is having money trouble these days."

"He over-reached himself a little," the colonel conceded. "The epidemic of hoof and mouth disease depleted his herds."

Iverson tried to think of the Plugged Nichol as a great, open, empty range holding only dim ghosts of the past. "Colonel, I want my name kept out of this. But I want this bank to see that John Mason gets a loan big enough to carry him. I'll gamble that he isn't whipped yet."

"How much will you gamble?"

"Anything I own. There is only one

condition: I don't want him to know I've had anything to do with it."

"I have always been a man of discretion, Iverson. I think it can be safely arranged."

Iverson turned from the window. "Then see me any time it's necessary, Colonel. Good day."

The colonel watched Iverson leave. He crossed to the window, marked Iverson's swinging progress across the street, until Iverson had disappeared in the Palace saloon.

The colonel shrugged his fine white brows. There were strange stiff-necked prides and loyalties in some men. He called to mind a time when John Mason had walked into this same office. "Colonel," Mason had said, "I understand Sundown Iverson is trying to raise money to buy the Palace. If he needs a loan, let him have it. The Plugged Nichol is well able to back the purchase of a saloon." The Plugged Nichol had been in those days. Mason had scratched his red beard stubble. "I don't want Iverson to know I've had anything to do with this, you understand?"

"I think I do," the colonel had said.

Now as Eben Testerman turned from the window and poured himself three fingers of Irish whiskey in a water glass, his eyes narrowed. You ran across such damn fools in this wild, half-civilized country. But every dollar Iverson poured into the floundering Plugged Nichol was that much less in the copper combine. He'll never bring in his road, the colonel thought. He was licked anyway before he began.

The next morning, the colonel took the Frisco stage. Cocomino was never sure what happened to the colonel on that vacation. Some said the beautiful, green-eyed girl was singing soft little songs in the dining room of the hotel where the colonel stayed. At first sight of her, he forgot his food, his propriety, his Irish whiskey. He listened to her sing and discovered that her voice was bad, but she did not need a good singing voice. She moved from table to table and when she reached the colonel he knew this was the most exciting woman he had ever seen. Cocomino waited for the colonel to return; Cocomino began to wonder; the vacation stretched into two months. And then the colonel Eben Testerman returned with a bride at his side.

* * *

In his big house overlooking Cocomino, the colonel gave a lavish party to present his bride to the town. John Mason was invited to the party but stayed on the Plugged Nichol. Sundown Iverson was invited, and came. He mingled with the swarm of people and drank the colonel's French champagne. He bowed to Elena Benton Testerman in the big parlor of the house, felt the cool, brief touch of her fingers on his. He murmured, "My respects, Mrs. Testerman," and she said something. There was a mocking triumph in her face as she looked at him. But there in the depths of her eyes was a light she couldn't completely veil. It startled Iverson, and the answering pound of his own pulse angered him. For an instant there was just the two of them in the crowded room; time was like a vapor that could be dispelled by the sun; and it might have been only last night that he had felt her searing kiss.

Then she dropped her gaze and the moment was gone. "So glad you could come, Mr. Iverson," she said. "Do have another glass of champagne."

Iverson left the party early, walked the dark back streets of Cocomino alone. He had gone to the party to see if the years had changed Elena Benton Testerman. And the years had. They had made her more beautiful than ever; she was at an apex now, like a flame flower that time had at last brought to full bloom. The girl

beauty had changed to woman beauty that filled a room, that drew men's eyes and bubbled the poison of automatic hatred in the hearts of women. And she had learned well; she had been as much at home in the colonel's big parlor greeting guests as a queen born to a palace.

THE colonel Eben Testerman went down to his office the next day to discover that a lot had happened in his absence. He returned that evening to his house, thoughtful, pre-occupied, even letting his eyes drift from his bride a few times during dinner.

He had retired to the parlor for a heavy drink when he heard the parlor door open. She was standing there in the soft light of the parlor candelabra.

"May I come in?"

"By all means, my dear!"

She came forward, her eyes searching his face. She had grace, the colonel thought. But there was about her a slight earthiness that the colonel sensed with the very fingertips of his consciousness. It fascinated him, drew him.

She said, "Something is troubling you."

"It's business, my dear. You shouldn't worry your head with it."

"But I want to. I'd like to help all I can."

"Business," the colonel chuckled, "is usually too complicated for a woman."

She didn't let him see her eyes. As if dutifully, she lowered her head, said quietly, "But it might help, clear it in your mind, if you talked it out to me."

"It's the railroad. Iverson has surprised me as an organizer. He's getting the people behind him—and if he gets enough pennies together he could be plenty troublesome." He tossed off his drink, told her in detail of his attempts to bring in the R. H. & P.

She said, "You'd control the road?"

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"Its stretch from the main line south of here."

"And whoever controls the road will control Cocomino and all the country around here?"

"Your mind is at least that complicated," he said with an indulgent smile.

"I really think the road should be yours, my dear."

"I value that opinion," the colonel said, smoothing his Vandyke, "but there are other prevalent opinions."

"Do they matter?"

"I'm afraid they do."

"The government will give lands to the road?" she asked. "Grants for the right of way?"

The colonel nodded.

"Do you know the territorial delegate to the national government?"

"Certainly," the colonel said, "his name is Lewton Fenley."

She said nothing more. She walked to the window and looked down upon the lights of Cocomino town, waiting.

Testerman sounded a little breathless, "Fenley . . . Of course! I'm sure he could be bought . . . If the government turned a deaf ear to Iverson's plea for land grants, there'd be no earthly way he could bring in his road. And if he were stopped cold, there would be little trouble for me . . ."

His delighted laugh rang in the room. She turned, came toward him slowly. She put her head lightly against his chest. "You're a very brilliant man, Eben."

"Oh," he said expansively, "it just takes using your wits a little."

"Of course," she murmured, "I know."

The colonel Eben Testerman did not see the smile on her face.

TIME passed like the falling of leaves on a windy hillside and the leaves were like the memories of men, some vanishing with the wind, some buried under other leaves and grown to moss, some clinging to the earth tenaciously. Colonel Eben Testerman's power spread like the flowering of new leaves on the trees. He got his railroad, and he found power like strong wine, and he had always had an un-ending appetite for strong drink. There were some in Cocomino whose gossip included the beautiful woman who moved under the colonel's roof. She, they said, was the real power; she led him blind, without his knowledge; she fed his sense of self-importance as only a beautiful woman can. But these things of course were never voiced in the colonel's presence. Even had they been, he would have brushed them aside in short rage; for the colonel knew that he was a brilliant man, and one day when the territory became a state, the nation would know it!

John Mason was giving the colonel Eben Testerman some weighty thought that afternoon as he reined his dun horse down the slopes of Cripple creek. Thoughts of the colonel naturally led to thoughts of his wife. Mason could think of her now without pain, without memory tearing open time-healed wounds. He found it strange and dream-like to remember that he had once almost wed her. He remembered that night he'd found her in Iverson's arms, the moment he'd tossed a coin and dared Iverson to call it. He thought: The young can be such fools.

Mason hunched his broad shoulders against the chill twilight wind that lanced down the shallow valley from off the silent, surrounding mountains. He let his dun horse pick its way out of the birch, and stopped the animal. Below him on the slope stood a wagon and a pitched tent. A young woman in faded gingham was stirring food in a blackened iron pot over a campfire. Two tiny children were playing jacks with pebbles near her, and from up the slope, in the timber, came the ringing of an axe.

John Mason scratched his red beard with the back of his hand. As his gaze

moved up the slope, he saw the fresh cut logs, the beginnings of a house.

He set his lips, rode across the clearing toward the woman at the campfire. She and the children heard the *clopping* of the dun's hoofs and looked up.

A strange look came in Mason's eyes as he looked at the young wife of the squatter. She was even younger than he'd thought at first, and looked so damned tired. She pushed a strand of brown hair back from her forehead, said, "Howdy. My husband is there in the timber. I guess he'd want you to sit awhile and have supper."

"I'm not sure he'd want me," Mason said. "My name is John Mason."

She caught in a faint breath; then she called, "Jim! Come here, Jim!"

The axe stopped ringing in the timber. A gangling young man appeared, a double-bitted axe across one shoulder, a blued carbine in his other hand. He walked down toward the campfire smiling, but the smile died a quick death when the young wife said, "Jim, it's the Plugged Nichol owner."

The young man hitched his homespuns and looked up at the stone-faced man astride the dun horse. Mason said, "What's that you're building there, sonny?"

The young man flushed. "What does it look like?"

"It looks mighty like a house, but you can't build a house here."

"It's my land!"

"It's Plugged Nichol land."

The young man shifted the carbine. "It's government land, and I've filed on it, and that makes it mine!"

"This land was Plugged Nichol range before the government ever thought about it." Mason looked at the carbine, his eyes going cold. "I'd be careful how I pointed that thing. It might get somebody hurt."

"It sure might, mister! You better ride on and tend your cows!"

Slow color flooded Mason's face. He swung off the dun horse. The two children sensed something wrong and gathered near the young woman's skirts. They were about to whimper. The young man paled before Mason's advance but held his ground.

THERE was a weary note in Mason's voice. "I wonder how long this is going on? Over three years ago a bunch of politicians passed a homestead act for this territory. Eben Testerman's lackeys had a hand in that, because the colonel's bank is going to make itself master here. I wish you could see that.

"You've come like a swarm of locusts, daily, weekly, month in and month out. Is there no end to you? You've cut the land into front yards and back yards. You've sliced it into little parcels and separated the parcels with wire. You've fenced off water and plowed under the grass—and colonel Eben Testerman's bank has a lien against every single son of you for tool money and feed money. When the bank has froze you out, the land will legally be his."

"The land will be mine!" the young man said. "Because I'll work. I'll pay off that note."

"Wishful thinking never got a man or a group of men anywhere, younker. All of you are penniless, hunting a living, or you would never have pulled up stakes and come here. The lot of you is so poor we lose several head of beef every day because some desperate sodbuster has pole-axed him a steer to keep his children from starving.

"This ain't farming country, sonny. This is queer country. About every seven years something happens to us here. We call it drought. The creeks dry up. The green things wither. Men post guards over their water reserves. Cattle bawl like thirsty babies and usually some of them die. Men measure out water drop by drop,

and a shave once a month is a mighty important thing!

"You don't know this land, and you can't be told—because you believe what you see with your eyes and what other people have already told you. You're ruining this whole range, with your plows and fences. When the drought hits, where will you be? Where will we be? That plowed up land, unprotected and bare, will bake harder than Indian pottery in the sun. It'll bake until nothing can grow in it. And when it's baked like that, the winds will come and tear the surface of the land loose and the dust storms will be so bad you won't to able to read a book or breathe at mid-day!

"I hate to think of your wife and babies being caught up in a land war, sonny. But that's what is going to happen. I've been the man who held the ranchers in check this long. But I can't hold them back any longer, and today I sent word into Cocomino town to that effect, to the man who's heading you squatters. Already there have been barn burnings and cattle-skinnings. For nearly three years Eben Testerman's bank has been bringing men in from the hole-in-the-wall. Cocomino town is full of such men. And the lid is ready to blow—last night in town a larruping pair of cowpunchers got in a fist brawl with a bunch of farmers. It turned into a gun fight and both punchers were killed. Cowmen have been gathering at the Plugged Nichol ranch house all day. They're going to be ready to ride after nightfall. I don't know if I can hold them back, or even if I should. But I'd like to think I got one family out of the killing and burning. Sonny, pack that wagon! It will be best for all of us!"

John Mason turned, mounted the dun. "I reckon that's about the longest speech I ever made to anybody, sonny. What I'm trying to say is, California would be a lot better for you, if you have time to get out!"

SUNDOWN Iverson rode with as much speed as he could through the blackness of early night. The tension of the past two hours was still ridged in his stomach. After all the vanished, event-filled years, Iverson had at last gone back to the Plugged Nichol ranch house. He had geared himself to facing John Mason directly, but Mason hadn't been at his ranch house. Mason had gone off to warn some new young squatter to get out of the way before the cauldron of range war brimmed over.

Iverson worked his laboring horse up the steep trail. He conceded to himself that he had been, perhaps, a fool to undertake his mission to the Plugged Nichol. It had been disappointing, a little sad, this trip, and had left Iverson with a feeling of bitterness in him. He should have known before. He had heard from Anson Crowder's own lips that John Mason had served notice on the nesters. Crowder, a big, stalwart, rawboned leader of the farmers, hadn't wanted to believe it either.

Iverson had stood in his saloon that day, feeling the tension over Cocomino town, the rising tide of blood lust, a tide so strong that a man couldn't live in Cocomino, have his interests there, without taking his stand on one side or the other.

Iverson had decided to make one last gesture, and had ridden to the Plugged Nichol. Even as he approached the buildings, the sight of which reacted on his pulse, he had hoped. But when he'd stopped in the Plugged Nichol yard, looked at the ranchers packed there, he'd felt the death of hope. He'd ridden in their midst, conscious that one overt act would cause them to blast him from the saddle. He was a town man; he was not one of them.

A man had said, "Have you come to ride with us, Iverson?"

"I've come to ask you not to ride!"

An angry growl passed over the swarm of ranchers and their punchers.

"You men," Iverson said, "are taking the same position the Indians took when the first whites came here. What do you hope to gain?"

"Land, Iverson—and freedom!"

"Freedom for just yourselves? At somebody else's expense? What kind of freedom is that? Listen to me. You're taking a short view. For every nester you kill or drive out, there are a dozen more waiting to come. The tide of change has hit this country, whether you like it or not."

A howl of angry curses met his words. Iverson let it subside, his face showing nothing, like a figure of stone on his skittish horse. "Change has come," Iverson repeated when he could make himself heard again, "and there is no stopping it. People are going to suffer. Some farmers are going to starve. But there will come deep wells, windmills, and pumps—and this land will be a place of plenty for all.

"You're hot under your collars because of some of the things the farmers have said and done. But you're playing right into another man's hands, a man gone mad with power. Colonel Eben Testerman is playing you off against each other. I say the farmers would cool down, if you get that young army of gunslicks the colonel has brought in out of owlhoot country."

A man stepped forward. "I say to hell with all this, Iverson. Two punchers have died. Are you riding with us, or against us?"

"I had hoped it wouldn't come to that."

"Any man who doesn't ride with us is against us—especially a town saloon keeper!" A burst of angry approbation met the speaker's words. Iverson looked at the man, pulled his six-shooter, and rested it across his saddle-horn. He said, "I'll thank you to take your hands off this horse's reins."

His cool detachment narrowed the play to himself and the man at the head of his animal. The yard grew quiet. The tall puncher flushed, slowly let his hand drop from the reins of Iverson's horse.

Iverson let his gaze sweep the yard again. "Will you let me bring Anson Crowder here to represent the farmers, to talk this thing over like sensible men?"

UTTER silence met his words. He knew the play against the man who'd grabbed his horse's reins had been the final touch. If there had been angry words shouted at the mention of Anson Crowder's name, he would have still felt hope. But the angry resentment and bristling

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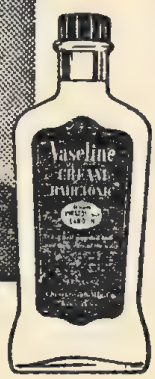

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hostility had passed the point of words.

Iverson knew his inner feelings did not show on his face, and for that he was glad. If they knew what he was actually feeling, some of them later might have recalled him with pity. He had walked his horse out of the Plugged Nichol ranch yard, and he had known he would remember a long time the silence that lay over the yard.

Now as he pushed his horse back toward Cocomino town in the early darkness, he tried to dispel the feeling of disaster that rode him. He reached the ridge south of Cocomino, and there he pulled the reins back and stiffened in the saddle.

His breath whistled softly through his teeth. Below him, stretching away in the night, lay a valley. Here and there down the valley a diamond gleamed in the darkness, and he knew that every diamond was a house or barn afire.

Iverson cursed in impotent rage. Professional gunhands, brought in these past months by Eben Testerman's bank, had jumped the gun. They were doing the raiding down there, but they would be masked and in the darkness it would seem that cattlemen were riding. The killing of the two punchers last night in Cocomino had been too good an opportunity to pass up. Eben Testerman was gambling everything on the outcome of this night. With the farmers gone, the Cocomino bank would own their lands, run its own herds, and the bank's control of the railroad would determine whose cattle were shipped; like a giant drunk on its own blood, the combine in a few years would squeeze out the ranchers.

Iverson raked his horse with his spurs, pointed the nose of the animal direct for Cocomino town.

Iverson saw the gray pall of smoke against the night sky over Cocomino. A building on the lower side of town was aflame. To his ears came the intermittent popping of gunfire.

He swung his laboring horse through the back streets; they were as deserted and shadow-filled as the streets of a ghost town. He slid off the horse behind the Palace, entered the saloon through the rear. When he reached the big room out front that contained the bar, he drew up short. The firing out on the main street was growing in volume. He crossed to a window, pulled the curtain back. He saw flashes of gunfire at the farther end of the street, working back up this way, toward the hub of town.

He moved to the door, out on the boardwalk, gun in hand. The flitting shadows of men, retreating, fighting a rear guard action, moved along the boardwalk, up the dusty street.. From the far end of the street, flashing gunfire answered them.

Pressed back against the face of the building, Iverson saw a man reel and fall a few yards away from him down the boardwalk. He moved in a crouch, reached the man's side.

It was Anson Crowder, the rawboned, gaunt leader of the farmers. His face was gray with pain. He had been wounded twice. As Iverson bent over him, Crowder spoke: "Testerman and half a dozen of his gunnies . . . Set on us down in Hodges Livery where I was trying to gather some men. Smoked us out of there and fired the place."

Iverson looked at the blood on Crowder's cheek, felt the stickiness on the man's shoulder.

"You're cut up pretty bad," he said, "but hang on. I'll get you into the Palace."

Crowder called out weakly to his men and shadows broke for the east boardwalk. They fired in a body, covering Iverson, as he dragged Crowder back into the gloomy depths of the saloon.

HE SLAMMED the door and threw the bolt when the last man was in. He looked at the four gasping, sweat-grimed farmers armed with shotguns and

rifles. He wondered if words would make sense to them, penetrate the bitter madness and blood lust that blankets the faces of honest men pushed beyond endurance.

"It's a general attack," Iverson said. "They're burning everything in the valley. "And," his voice dripped bitterness, "John Mason seems determined to ride. There's one chance. My horse is in back. One of you will have to round up every available man that's left in the valley, gather here, make a stand in a body. Crowder, which man will the valley farmers answer to quickest?"

The wounded leader was stretched out on the bar, looking like a dead man in the feeble light of a low-turned lamp a farmer had stuck a sulphur match to. He rolled his eyes up in his sockets and said, "Lon Tabor."

"Hell, I hate to go," Tabor said. "I'd like to stay here and kill me a Testerman man or two!"

"This way you'll be getting a dozen of them, Lon," Crowder said. "Take care when you hit the valley. The important thing is to get men back here."

Tabor clomped out of the saloon in his flat-heeled boots. Iverson turned his attention back to the front window. The farmer at the door of the Palace said, "Here they come!"

Eben Testerman and his six gunhands had pulled from under cover. Stirrup to stirrup they swept down the street, stirring a cloud of dust in the silver light of the new-risen moon. Eben Testerman was at their center, his snowy head like a battle flag. His voice was roaring out in a bull-like bellow, and Iverson knew he was devil-mean drunk on Irish whiskey.

Bullets peppered the face of the Palace. "Easy," Iverson said harshly, "hold your fire." He let the line of horsemen sweep closer, said, "Now!"

Shotguns roared. A man dropped in the dusty street. Horses reared back on their haunches. Testerman pulled his men back to the shadows between two buildings across the street.

"Iverson," Testerman screamed from over there, "I'll have your hide for this, you dirty son! You stink of the soil the same way they do! But this is my night. You're not big enough to stop me! You're just big enough for me to kill the way I would a cur coyote!"

Testerman's drunken laughter rang out in the night. "Fire is the medicine for you, saloon keeper! I want to see the flesh shrivel on your bones!"

CHAPTER FOUR

New Trails

ELENA Benton Testerman heard the the bellowed threats of the colonel from her vantage point on the knoll at the end of Main Street. From that point she had seen the whole action, disregarding the drunken commands the colonel had mouthed at her before darkness to stay in the house until a new day had dawned.

She was dressed in the old jeans and flannel shirt that she used to garden in, and sat astride a strong sorrel gelding. She looked at the dark hulk of the Palace off there in the distance, imagined it burning, and thought of Sundown Iverson's flesh shriveling on his bones.

She quirted the sorrel, a snarl of rage sounding in her throat. Eben Testerman had gone mad! Or was it she who was touched by madness? For it was madness to feel the drain of the steely resolve that had stamped her earlier years. Madness to experience this ache because of the lingering memory of a kiss that had seared her lips years ago in a moment of hatred and high, evil passion.

The moving sorrel had brought her around the back streets of Cocomino. She squeezed the animal between the Palace and the big frame building next to it, slipped off the sorrel, and threw her

slender weight against the rear door of the saloon.

It opened. A hand grabbed her wrist. A man dragged her forward. She could smell soil and sweat on him. He dragged her out to the front of the Palace where the single lamp was burning.

She had no chance to say anything. The farmer crushed his hand over her mouth, jerked her arm up behind her back, and shoved her against the bar. His eyes were red as blood. Behind him, the two farmers flanking Iverson saw her, cursed, and surged toward her.

She knew then how these men felt about her, the stories they circulated about her, of her influence on Eben Testerman. There was blind hatred in their eyes.

She writhed in the big farmer's grip. She glimpsed Iverson moving in, one of the farmers spinning toward him. "Keep back from the she-wolf, Iverson! I don't know what brought her here, but we know how to handle this!"

Iverson saw the hate and blood-hunger in their eyes; they had spilled blood; they had suffered; her presence was like a splash of coal oil on a roaring fire.

Iverson swung his gun up. The man nearest him squeezed the trigger of his rifle. Iverson fired back. The man clutched his shoulder, dropped his gun, and staggered back.

"Let her go," Iverson said. "I'll kill the first man that touches her."

He read their quick shift of opinion in the eyes smoldering at him. "I'm sorry," he said in a quiet voice, "I'm sorry."

He moved with the girl down the bar, hearing her shallow breathing, keeping the farmers covered with his gun.

He slammed the rear door behind him. She led him in a rush to the sorrel. He mounted, swung her up behind him.

HE WHEELED the sorrel, cut down the narrow back street. He almost gained its mouth before he brought the sorrel back on its haunches. Moonglow spilled over the scene. And he knew that the colonel had redeployed his men. The colonel and the dark, blocky shadow of one of his gunnies pulled up short in the mouth of the street.

"It's Iverson!" Testerman bawled. "Get the dirty son!"

Iverson threw all his weight against the sorrel, sent it plunging over in the deeper shadows of the street. Testerman's gunslinger drew, started to fan his gun. He only got one shot away before Iverson had shot him out of the saddle.

The colonel roared out his wrath. He sent a shot winging into the shadows. But Iverson was already moving, raking the sorrel's sides until the animal's eyes rolled and it was hurtling toward the colonel.

Eben Testerman realized then that this was Iverson's last gamble. He glimpsed the sorrel looming upon him, the flying copper hair and slight figure on the animal behind Iverson. Veins stood out like cords in the colonel's forehead. He spat curses like a man spitting poison. He fired twice, drawn up in the saddle like a white-maned old killer eagle. But the sorrel was moving fast, and the colonel missed .

Iverson saw the colonel's gun swinging down for the next shot, the berserk face behind the gun. Iverson squeezed the trigger; and then the face was gone.

He swung the sorrel around the mound that lay on the earth. The way was clear. The sorrel pounded down the darkened street, passed through the edges of Cocomino, and up the long steep trail that led to the crest of the hills ringing in the town.

When the sorrel began to blow, Iverson drew the animal to a stop, dismounted, and pulled the girl down beside him. She turned and looked at the fire and pall of smoke over Cocomino town.

"Power did something to him," she said. "It led him out to destroy."

"But that isn't why you showed up at

the Palace," sundown Iverson said slowly.

Her eyes flashed greenly at him. The impertinence of her face, the tilt of her chin, caused his lips to thin. He gripped her shoulders, shook her hard.

"You're a hard-headed little fool, Elena! I'll tell you what happened to you tonight. You got to thinking about women and young girls out on poverty ridden farms. It reminded you of a very similar girl who lived on a greasy sack ranch once."

"Let me go!"

He ignored her. "All your life you've tried to build a shell around the real Elena. You hated. You scorned. You were a damn little spit-fire. All the time you planned and schemed because you felt you had to get even with the world. But tonight the show-down came. Tonight there was killing and burning and a grasping man gone mad promising destruction for anybody who tried to stand in his way. And you couldn't stomach it."

She was sobbing; he could feel the tremors of the sobs passing through her body.

He grasped her chin in his palm, pulled her face up until moonlight was spilling over it. "Tonight I was pretty sure I wouldn't live to see the dawn. I was sorry —because there was a memory I couldn't get out of my mind, the memory of a girl I kissed to break up a scheme she had fashioned. I know now why I had to kiss her, had to break up that scheme, and so do you. I know I made a mistake long ago —the first time I ever saw you I should have turned you over my knee and tanned your bottom."

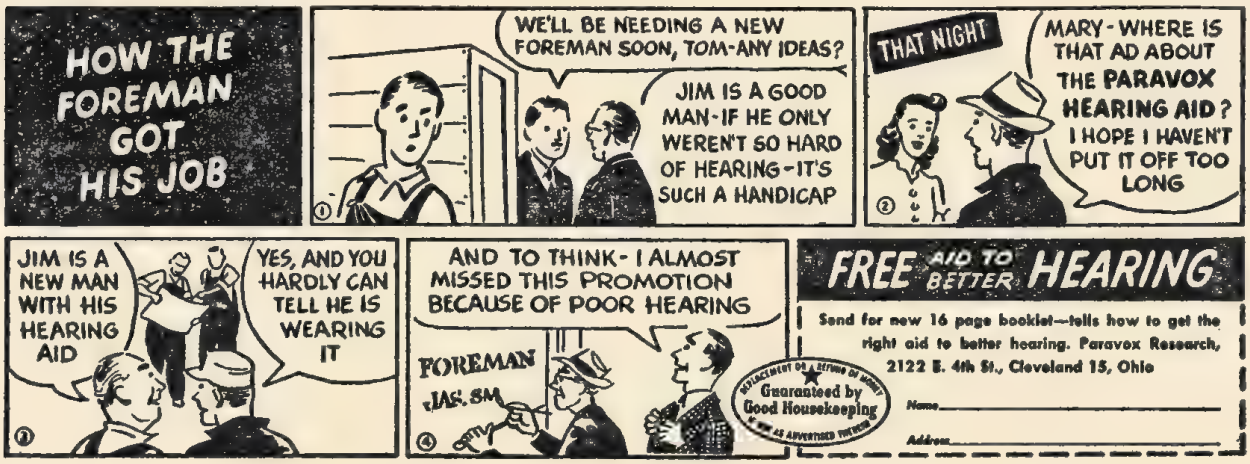
He looked at the tears coursing down her cheeks. He watched her lips form words. "One day soon will you let me come to you? Will you let me kiss you? Not now. . . We were never really married, Eben Testerman and I. He only wanted a woman he thought was beautiful around him, and he knew I never loved him. But legally I was his wife, and there'll have to be a period of time before I can come to you the way I want to."

"I understand," Iverson said. He let her hands slip from his, watched her swing astride the sorrel, and stood looking as the sorrel picked its way down the rocky trail, until it had vanished in the night. . . .

* * *

This, then, is the tale men tell of Sundown Iverson and John Mason, who were closer than brothers, and of the girl Elena. They tell of Mason leading his ranchers against farmers and finding not farmers but hired gunslingers. They tell of how he fought and how he was joined by the farmers. They tell of the peace and prosperity that came to Cocomino town. They speak of the wedding of the woman Elena and the man Iverson. They say that it was

(Please turn to page 130)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Beware the Desert Widow!

By Jim O'Mara

Each lonely man on that grim, womanless range wanted the strange, beautiful nester temptress . . . but which had the guts to win her from her lover—Death?

WHEN he saw the distant riders swinging to cross his path ahead, Cantrell pulled down to a trot and after a moment's squinting against the desert glare brought in focus Sheriff Jim McWhorter leading twelve horsemen. Cantrell came to a halt and waited, work-

His rush caught Cantrell at the waist and they tumbled into the crowd.

ing with the makings while the posse rolled up and stopped, raising a cloud of dust.

He was a long, limber man, with the ease of the rider all through him and the dark touch of wind and sun on his lean features. His gray eyes were half-hidden by drooping lids, and now he drew easily on his smoke and waited as the sheriff rode up to his stirrup.

McWhorter nodded, running a grimy neck-piece over his dust-streaked face. "Hot," he said. "Too damned hot to chase stage robbers."

"Which stage?" Cantrell asked.

"The south-bound, other side of Horsehead Creek," the sheriff replied. "They took to the water in Easter Valley. Then they came out in that shale below Mesa Chiquita, and we lost their sign. You see any strange hombres up your way, Rand?"

"No," Cantrell said, "not lately. But I'll tell the boys."

The sheriff nodded, squinting away with resigned displeasure toward the shimmering distance. "You do that." He hesitated, disliking this day's ride and wanting to tarry. Presently he said, "We rode past your line-shack, down by the railroad. You got nesters down there again, Rand."

Cantrell nodded. "Smoky told me last night."

McWhorter eyed him tentatively. "There's a woman," he said.

"That's what I hear."

There was a little silence now, and McWhorter cleared his throat and spat. "This is Quirt Narny's stage-robbin' bunch," he said. He shifted his buttocks on the leather, the weight on the stirrups making a thin, rasping sound. "Bad hombres. Narny was doin' time but he made a break and picked up a couple of wild punchers. Looks like they might be settling down around here."

"Well, it'll be a job for you," Cantrell said.

"It'll be that." The sheriff waited, cocked an uncertain eye at Cantrell. "Maybe you'd better leave a gun with that woman down there, Rand."

"She won't need it." Cantrell's voice held an edge of asperity. "She's not going to stay."

A man in the posse laughed a laugh that brought Cantrell's hard gaze around. It was Lacey Small, furtive and elusive, somehow, despite his physical bulk. Cantrell had always disliked him and now that dislike showed in his face.

McWhorter said quickly, "Well, it's your business. But maybe you'd better think it over." He reined about. "A woman out here will draw men. . . ." He made a sweeping, overhead arc with his arm and the posse burst into motion with a nervous scuffling of hoofs and a quick straining of leather.

Cantrell watched them roll away, then settled into the saddle and rode on toward the shack. He wasn't a hard man, but the nesters moved in there by the railroad tracks and refused his men admittance when they wanted to use the place. He had his rights to think of.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the woman as he rode up, but he paid her scant attention. Then, as he looped the reins, he heard the child's fretful crying behind the sun-warped clapboard walls and the sound forced a long, sobering breath into him. He held it for long seconds, looking down at the powdered earth at his feet, and then he exhaled, slowly, and a piece of his determination went with it. He turned to look at her.

She was a tall woman, still young and full of body. She had straw-colored hair, blue eyes and a generous mouth, drawn now in worried lines. The darker light of the shack's interior framed her in the doorway, making a picture of warm loveliness unmarred by the cheap, faded dress she wore.

Cantrell stepped slowly forward and said, "I'm Rand Cantrell, owner of this

shack." Indecision made him hesitate only a moment. "I came to tell you that you'd have to leave."

She kept her gaze steady. Then, without a word, she turned and went inside and after a moment he followed. Across the rough board table she was looking at him, her blue eyes weighing him and testing the temper of his hardness. "I'm not asking for charity," she began. "I'd pay you for staying here."

"Sorry." His voice sounded kinder than he intended it to. "My crew will need the shack at round-up time."

"That's a long while yet," the woman said with quick bitterness. "The railroad people told me so. They thought it would be all right, since the money ran out here, and—" She paused, then left it that way.

"Only three miles to Del Rio," Cantrell said gruffly. "Why didn't they take you there?"

She took a deep breath and looked down at the table. "I wanted the boy to have the desert air. He hasn't been well."

THE dry, burning wind blew through the open door, bringing dust and a strange disturbing warmth with it. She was looking out the window now, a dogged kind of waiting about her, and Cantrell found himself watching her mouth. Then he drew his glance away and turned it to the rusty iron-frame bed where the child slept fitfully. Afterward he looked back at the girl and something made him think of a prisoner waiting to receive sentence.

Weariness with the whole thing suddenly swept through him. He dragged a chair to the table and sat down. "I'd like a drink," he said. Then venting his exasperation: "Or did the railroad people throw that in with the deal?"

Thin-lipped, she brushed past, leaving him conscious of a subtle body fragrance and of the rhythmic motion of her long legs. She went out to the well-house, drew fresh water and filled the cup. Then she turned and came forward, each soft outline of her body telling him that this was a lonely land, and a hard one. She caught his gaze on her and he looked away.

As he took the cup from her he noted that she wore a wedding-band; saw, too, that her arms were round and firm. A small clash of inward emotions made him say, "I'll come back and talk to your husband." He turned toward the door.

Her voice behind him was thin and hesitant. "I'm a widow. My husband . . . died . . . two years ago."

He turned, feeling an instant lifting of interest in this woman, and a train of thought stirred up, full of warm, sensuous fantasies. But because she had made it a reluctant admission, he knew that it meant a defense had fallen and so he said gruffly, "I'm sorry." But the lie in his words stood there between them.

"I'll pay you, just the same." She did not look at him.

Cantrell, looking again at her mouth, was wondering when she had last been kissed. He said slowly, "I think we can work it out."

Her eager glance came up, surprising the thoughts that were in his eyes. She drew herself up and in the moment that their eyes met he knew that she had read him. "I suppose you do want cash, Mr. Cantrell," she mocked him. "Or were you thinking of taking payment *in kind?*"

Color rose hotly to his face. "Three dollars!" he said harshly. "Payable now!"

"You know I have no money!" she blazed. "Why do you try to corner me like this?"

"Oh, hell!" he blurted his discomfiture and defeat. "It'll be all right." Smarting under her sudden arrogance, he went to the tie-up and stepped aboard. Then he looked at this girl who had bested him because she was alone and beautiful, and a sardonic grin caught at his lips.

"What do you call yourself?" he drawled.

Ever so little, the tightness about her mouth relaxed. "Estes," she said after a moment. "Helen Estes."

He sat appraising her. Then: "Everything has a price, Mrs. Estes," he said laconically. "A shack like this wouldn't buy much of—some things. But when I start after something I want, the sky's the limit. If I can't buy it, I *take* it. You'll find that out as you get to know me."

The girl drew erect. After a while she said coldly, "I haven't the slightest desire to get to know you, Mr. Cantrell." Then she turned her back on him and went inside.

TWICE in the next week he found occasion to ride past the shack. Each time she showed him a distant courtesy, a wary unconcern that began by annoying him and left him with a feeling of frustration. During the next two weeks, while he was in the Mesilla Basin looking for new herdbulls, he tried to form an attitude toward her, but because he was lonely as are all virile men in a country without women, he found no pattern to follow. Always her image returned to him, and out of the fear that a ruthless and hungering man might come upon her alone grew slowly the belief that she was his by prior right.

His return took him through Del Rio, and in the fine sifting of gossip through the town he learned that she was doing sewing; that there was a raised-eyebrow wonderment that he had let her stay, and that this nascent innuendo grew from her desirability.

Before the stage-post he joined a group in talk of rain and grass and the price of beef. When the conversation's thread had grown thin to breaking, a man said slyly, "They say that Mrs. Estes ain't a bit sociable. Good-lookin' widder like her oughta be kinda friendly."

Lacey Small's jeering voice made reply. "Them widders. It's just a matter of gettin' around 'em. Man has to play his cards right. Eh, Rand?"

He let the hot flood rise and recede before he acted. Then he stepped up to Small and said evenly, "Lacey, I never liked you. You've got a dirty mind. Next time you mention a decent woman that way, I'll beat your damned head off."

The desire for conflict stabbed momentarily through the hate in Small's eyes. Then, out of the thin, waiting moment he said, "No offense intended, Cantrell."

Cantrell walked away. It was the second time that the rangy man had betrayed his furtive, male interest in Helen Estes. Raw jealousy stung from Cantrell's spurs as he drove the palomino home fast.

He ordered a wagon loaded with food, dishes and odd pieces of furniture, to be taken to the shack next morning. Afterward, sitting on the veranda in the night's hot unrest, he wondered where this was taking him. It was morning when he rose

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stiffly and went inside the big ranchouse.

* * *

In the brittle height of the day's heat he rode down to the shack. The sight of her in the doorway brought a quick throbbing to his throat. Then, as he came to the porch, scorn leaped at him from her blue eyes.

"Was this," she gestured toward the things the wagon held, "your estimate of my price?"

Cantrell stepped toward her. Before what was in his face she retreated to the interior and stopped with the table between them. Holding her with his gaze, Cantrell said softly, "These last two weeks seemed like two years."

A flush rose to her face, and she looked away from his eyes. Presently: "I hate being poor," she said bitterly. "I hate these things you sent, because they are important to me. And I hate—" she broke off. Then, suddenly, she whirled angrily upon him. "You use every advantage, don't you? Well, you can take them back! I don't need them."

"When I first saw you," he came around the table and stood tall above her, "I knew that you were the biggest thing that ever hit this country."

"Worth all the things you sent down," she mocked him. "You flatter me, Mr. Canrell!"

Cantrell exploded. "Damn those things! Throw them out for all I care! You needed them and I had them. But don't let pride make a fool of you."

"Is it your way," she went on, "to provide all lonely widows with things they need? Or have you just started this fine work with me? How very noble!"

"Listen to me." Cantrell's gaze was like that of a man seeing things in the distance. "Quit this game of hide-and-seek." As surprise came over her face he drove on, "While I was gone, you walked in my mind and would give me no rest. The thought of you was like a song that kept coming back, wanting to be sung."

Now she looked at him earnestly, the mockery gone, and her color deepened. There was a wavering something behind her gaze and he saw her bosom rapidly rise and fall. "Don't say things like that," she breathed. "You have no right—"

"The hell I haven't!" He came close, putting his hands on her arms. At his touch, the curtain lifted from behind her eyes and she let him see nakedly all that was in her for a man and something of her own hunger.

For a moment their glances held, while the warm breeze came through the window and wrapped them around with its soft urging. Cantrell saw the woman's mouth grow soft and round and loose with surrender. Then he put his hand on her waist and swayed her to him, and as her lips opened beneath his mouth her arms came up and brought his head down, fiercely and tight.

Out of a long, clinging and mad moment he felt her stiffen. She drew her mouth away and fought free of his arms. "No," Her voice was choked. "In God's name, no! It's impossible!"

He went toward her. "Nothing you could say would mean much now. There's too much woman in you, Helen, and it's all lonely woman."

"You took advantage of that," she accused. "You've thought that over." Abruptly, she turned from him, shame in her face. "I deserved it. I'm as cheap as you are."

Cantrell said harshly, "You wanted to be kissed. But you're afraid, because you think you owe me something. Would it make a difference if I'd known you a year or two? What's the time limit on a thing like this?"

"Don't. Please, don't—"

But he drove relentlessly on, "You're thinking that I tried to buy you with this

shack and the other things, and it hurts because you damned near sold out." He saw her wince. "Well, maybe I did and maybe I didn't. But if you believe that, you're setting your own price too low. Sure, I want you. Hell, yes! I want you on any terms you'll make!"

Suddenly she turned on him, her face a blazing fury. "For God's sake, don't hound me! Go away. And please—please—don't come back . . ." Then she threw herself on the bed, her face hidden in her arms, her shoulders shaking convulsively.

Man-like, he was disconcerted. He took a step toward her, but her muffled voice cried out, "No. Go away!" Undecided, he stood a moment, then walked slowly toward the door. Here a thought, born of their moment of abandonment, came to him and he took one of his guns from its holster and laid it on the rough pine board.

"There are bad hombres about," he said gently. "I'm leaving a gun for you."

She continued to sniffle into the pillow, and after a moment Cantrell added, "Whatever you may think, you're damned important to me." Then he left her.

FOR a week he had wrestled with the impulse to return and force a climax. Now, riding toward the line-shack, he argued that Lacey Small was drawing him this way. His riders had found Small lurking in the vicinity and the rangy man had tried to run away, a thing which, in Cantrell's mind, made him guilty. As his mind played darkly with the implications of that guilt, turbulence, hot and bitter, roiled up in his mouth.

Even as the palomino topped the rise, bringing the line-shack into view a half-mile away, Cantrell saw the rider spurring at a dead run from the cabin, at some distance from it. Small had dared to come back! Jealous fury swam over him and he sank the spurs into the palomino. But the lead was too great, and presently he gave up the futile pursuit and turned back.

He swung down and stalked to the door. Pale and tense, she waited behind the table, her mouth tight.

Cantrell read guilt upon her. Anger pinched his mind and flowed into his speech as he said abruptly, "If you think you can play the perpetual virgin with me and let others come sneaking around, you're wrong. You try to take me for all you can and—" Something in her face, a dead whiteness, stopped him.

"No one was here," she said in a flat voice.

The lie was a knife in his bowels. "That fellow I chased out there," he said harshly. "Small. He came from here."

"You're wrong, Mr. Cantrell. He rode past. He was not here."

He glowered a moment, then strode out to the tie-up. The persistent wind was already filling the tracks about the pole with dust. They might have been made by one horse or ten . . . He went back to the house.

"Nobody here," he said heavily. "Nobody?"

Now the whiteness began to leave her face. She drew erect, and suddenly she blazed at him. "My life is my own. It can never touch you or concern you. Never. Remember that!"

"So he *was* here! You give me nothing, try to use me, while—"

"Stop!" It was almost a scream. Eyes blazing with anger, she came toward him. "You think I'm a loose woman. Well, I'll not tell you what I think of you. But I've had enough of your insinuations, Mr. Cantrell. It's too big a price to pay for a roof over our heads. I'm leaving here. Now, get out!"

He had overstepped himself. As he looked at her, embarrassment grew, and anger left him at the thought of her going away. After a while he turned toward the door. "I'm sorry. A man will say some damn'fool things when . . . when he's crazy

about a woman." He stepped outside, mounted and rode away toward the town without looking back.

In Del Rio he stopped at a store, made a purchase and turned back the way he had come.

She had been weeping, but tears had washed the anger from her eyes. Cantrell laid the package on the table and opened it. "Peace offering," he said shortly. As he lifted the dress from the box he saw the excitement leap to her eyes. And then a look that he knew came there.

He said quickly, "No strings attached. Except one: you've got to wear it to the dance with me tomorrow, over at Tres Esquinas."

A brief struggle of antagonism, of doubt and amusement ran over her face. Then, slowly, she smiled. "My little brother used to go stand in the corner all by himself, when he'd been naughty," she mused. "Without anyone telling him . . ."

And then they both laughed and the tension had broken.

"Try it," he urged. "Just try it."

She held the dress up to her. It was of powder-blue, trimmed in gold. "Beautiful!" Her eyes were shining. "Just beautiful!" Then her gaze rose gravely to his and he saw on her face the look that had beeen there when he broke into the shack.

"No." She held the dress toward him. "I—I can't."

"You need to forget your troubles," he urged. "Bet you haven't been to a dance in years."

She thought that over. Then, waveringly: "Well, there's the baby, and—"

"We'll leave him with my old *criada* at the ranch."

"I'd love to go," and the tide turned as she hestitated, "so very much . . ."

Cantrell sensed the need for apology. "Helen," he said awkwardly, "I—I'm sorry about—what I said."

Again the curtain behind her gaze half-lifted for an instant. "All of it?" she murmured. "Not all of it, please. . . ."

As he rode homeward, he told himself that she had lied to keep him from violence with Lacey Small. That was a woman's way. And he admitted that this woman had, somehow, become to him bigger than the biggest thing in this country. Maybe bigger than anything else in life.

THE stag-line had put its seal of approval upon her. Cantrell, half-pleased, half-chagrined, stood in the shadows of a giant cottonwood tree, smoking and watching the dancers through the open windows. The longing for her was a tangible thing as he watched her, flushed and smiling, abandoned to the music.

The music stopped, the rhythmic scraping of feet ended. Cantrell crushed out his cigarette and drifted back to the doorway. As he pushed his way through the crowd the fiddles started up again. He came to the edge of the floor and stopped, feeling the swift, hot rise of violence inside him.

She was in Lacey Small's arms. He had not known that Small was here. Now Small bent his head close, speaking to her confidentially, with a leering smile on his lips. Cantrell's imagination put words—hated words—to the scene. And in the rushing moment before he acted, he found the sum of Lacey Small's innuendoes, his clandestine male interest in Helen Estes, and of the visit to the shack by the railroad. Cantrell's own frustrations, his raw, unsatisfied hunger for her, were knives cutting away his control as he saw this man fondling her and showing the world that he held her cheaply—he saw her suddenly push away from Small and speak to him angrily. Then Cantrell stepped across the floor.

He came up behind and jerked Small hard by the collar.

Small swung his angry, blood-shot gaze around. "What the hell!"

"I warned you," Cantrell said tightly.

"Now you get it. Now you get it good!"

The music stopped in mid-note. There was a movement of people away from them. He heard Helen saying agitatedly, "Please, Rand. Please—it was nothing."

"You talk big, Cantrell," Small sneered. "Want to keep a good thing for yourself, don't you?"

Cantrell's blow knocked Small on the flat of his back. He got up shaking his head. "All right," he grunted. "So we'll play rough."

His rush caught Cantrell at the waist and they tumbled into the crowd, Small on top. Cantrell drove his skull up hard and there was a crunching of bone and a low groan. Someone pulled them up, saying, "Kill the dirty son, Rand!"

Small circled away, Cantrell following him warily, on the balls of his feet. "Don't run, Small," he said softly.

A rush and a ripping blow from the floor spun Cantrell around. He pivoted as Small threw himself forward in a flying leap. Cantrell caught it with a braced knee, and Small's face smashed into that knee and he hung for a moment before falling. Cantrell hooked a swishing right into the man's face and Small toppled hard to the floor and lay still.

Cantrell's mad eyes beat at the crowd. "Any of his friends like to take over?" he said. "Anyone at all?"

There was a commotion in the crowd toward the doorway and Jim McWhorter came forward into the room. He glanced briefly at the tableau, then raised his hand for attention.

"Hate to bust up a shindig," he announced, "but some of you boys'll have to save your steppin' for the next time. That Narny bunch robbed the bank over at Huecos and one of 'em got killed."

A ripple of comment went through the crowd. Cantrell heard a man curse.

McWhorter said, "They think Narny and the other one are both hit. I need a posse. Step up now, you fellows!"

In a moment there was movement toward the door as the younger men followed the sheriff outside. Someone was helping Small to his feet. The fiddles began to scrape tentatively, and it was over. Cantrell turned toward Helen.

She stood white-faced, all emotion drained from her countenance, looking at nothing. Cantrell said shortly, "Let's go." Without a word she followed him.

They rode home in silence, took the sleeping child from Cantrell's Mexican woman and drove on wordlessly through the still moonlight to the shack. He put the child on the bed and when he came out she was down, standing on the porch, half-hidden from the moonlight by the porch's shadows.

Looking at her, he felt for the first time in her presence a boyish unease. Presently he said, "It didn't turn out the way I'd planned it."

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"No," she said quietly, "for me, either."

He had to say this thing, to get it straight with her. "I wouldn't have treated you so nicely tonight if it hadn't been for Small insulting you like that. He changed my mind."

"There was no need for that, Rand," she said in a strange voice. "He was drunk."

"He'll not come around here bothering you again."

She turned to face him. "He was never here!" Her voice fell. "Before God, he was never here."

He waved her words aside. "You don't have to lie about it, Helen. I'm glad it happened the way it did. Everything. It opened my eyes."

He saw the perplexity on her face. "Now I know," he said in a low voice. "Just having you wouldn't be the answer. I want to stand between you and everything that could harm you; I want to push aside the things you hate, Helen, and keep ugly things from touching you. God knows I need the feel of you in my arms. But — well — there's something else—" He could not make her see what was in his heart. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," Helen Estes said softly. "Yes, I do understand . . . "

"Helen, marry me," Rand Cantrell blurted out.

She stepped back from him, her eyes wide, her hand at her throat. And in her face was pain which came from the need to say a thing she almost dared not say.

The big man before her felt refusal rise out of her silence. "This life," he said tiredly. "It wouldn't mean much without you to—care for."

After long seconds speech, thin and distant, came to her lips. "I'm going away tomorrow, Rand. That's why I went with you tonight. To be with you—nice—just once. You see, Rand, it came to us too late. I—" there was a long pause and it might have been the wind's still voice which then said "—I lied to you. I'm already married."

IN THE deadening heat of the day he sat as though in a dream and felt emptiness and a cold, dull pain in his vitals. Almost, he did not look up when the sheriff's posse rolled tiredly into the yard and McWhorter dismounted and came and stood over him.

"Rand," a querulous edge rolled along the sheriff's voice. "Rand, you missin' one of your guns lately?"

"No," Cantrell said tiredly.

After a long moment the sheriff said softly, "Then what in hell was one of your guns doin' on that dead partner of Narny's, over at Huecos?"

He didn't want to grapple with it. "You're crazy," he said at last.

"If I didn't know where you were last night," McWhorter said petulantly, "I could damn near take you in for this." He took a gun from his belt. It had the pearl handle and the RC monogram inlay of all Cantrell's revolvers. "How you explain that?"

But Cantrell, too, was thinking of where he had been last night and the memory hurt too much. He said, "Forget it. A man loses things like that out of his scabbard."

Uneasily, the sheriff turned away. At the steps he halted. "We got the second one, over in the Hueco Tanks," he said. "Looks like Narny's cleared out of the country." Cantrell said nothing, and the sheriff gave him a narrow look, full of resentment. "I suppose Mrs. Estes can be your alibi, so we'll forget about this . . ." McWhorter hesitated. Then: "By the way. You ever take her that gun, like I said?"

Yes, Cantrell thought, I took her the gun like you said. And I walked into a game, wide open, whose end I could not foresee until the pay-off suddenly went against me; I beat hell out of Lacey Small

because he had been bothering her and she was mine. Like a damned fool I was jealous of someone visiting her, and all the time she belonged to another, someone who could have been coming to see her . . .

Suddenly the spilling-over thoughts stopped. Dead center. Dead center with a growing, bright, brilliant light that expanded and burst around him with soaring, shimmering hope. He leaped to his feet.

"Give me that gun!" He jerked the revolver from the astounded McWhorter's hand and went at a run toward the corral. By the time the posse had headed eastward toward Del Rio, Cantrell was flying into the south, and the palomino's hoofs were drumming a song of hope that fate had not yet let her go away.

It was by chance that he saw the riderless horse running away into the distance, tapaderos flapping crazily along the saddle-skirts. His run had brought him to within fifty yards of the shack when the bullet ploughed through his sombrero, and his mind put the riderless horse and the sailing hat into one neat bundle and he swung quickly around to the back, left the saddle and leaped and skittered through the brush until his back was against the shack's hot sides and he was waiting to kill the man who stood at bay inside.

TIME stood still while he controlled his breathing, and waited. He knew that his next move would bring the break: the walls of this shack were thin. Death hung in every slow moment, and slowly the moments piled up to the bursting point.

Muscles drawn tense, he lowered his head and took a slow, deep breath, bringing ease back into him. And at that moment he saw a stone lying at his feet. Inching carefully, he bent and picked up that stone, hefted it, then, holding his gun ready, he threw it through the air ten feet away where it fell in the gravel by the shanty wall.

The shack seemed to explode, and he spun and put three quick shots through the thin boards at his back in the spot where the sound had come from. Then he threw himself five feet down the side and waited. A minute. Two minutes. Then he heard a groan. Caution told him that it could be a trap. After a long while the voice came from inside.

Weak, fading and slow, it said, "God's sake—come—in. Water. . . ."

Doubt ran out of him, but he went warily toward the window, shoved the gun through first. Then he saw a man on the red-stained floor and he knew the man was dying. He went around to the door.

The wounded man was youngish, wiry,

Cantrell was flying into the south.

with blond hair and a hard face that was now growing slack and sallow. Cantrell knelt with a cup of water. Holding the man's head up, he poured water between the white, caked lips. The eyes flickered open, lighting with momentary curiosity.

"Sheriff—?"

Cantrell said, "You're going, Narny. Which of your men was married to the woman who lived in this shack?"

The eyes livened with a sardonic light, then closed. Cantrell prayed they would reopen. They did. "Me." A long pause. Narny's breathing grew ragged and sharp. Then quiet for a moment. "I gave her—bad deal. Too good—for—me—" The breathing rose loud, rasping and climactic. The outlaw stiffened, then grew limp. Cantrell eased the body to the floor, went out and closed the door. He whistled for the palomino and it came and he leaped to the saddle and drove hard for Del Rio.

The station-agent looked up startled as Cantrell brushed in.

"Mrs. Estes," Cantrell said. "Which train did she take?"

"Tomlinson City, Rand. Why? Something wrong?"

"When's the next train for Tomlinson City?"

"Day after tomorrow. Leaves 'bout ten. When it's on time, that is—" But Cantrell was already swinging into the saddle, heading into the eastern desert.

* * *

It was eight o'clock and darkness had already fallen when Cantrell, worn and covered with dust, reined his lathered mount up before the hotel in Tomlinson City. He threw the reins at the tie-up and strode into the hotel.

"Mrs Helen Estes," he said to the night clerk.

"Room 9. Second floor. Turn right at head of stairs."

He heard the fear in her voice when she answered his knock. He opened the door and went in. She stood pale and tense in the lamplight, and at sight of him her hand flew to her mouth to stifle an exclamation. Then: "I—I thought—"

"I know," he said gently. "I know everything now. He'll never come to bother you again. He's dead."

The slow mercy of relief worked visibly through her. Suddenly she sank to the bed and covered her face with her hands. Understanding her need for tears, he let her weep for a moment. Then he went to her and raised her chin, cupped in his hand. "Why did you go away?"

Remembrance tugged at her features. "I thought that I might still help him—when he would be free. Then he picked up with that—gang—and I knew it was no use. He had never been so—so evil before."

"*He* took the gun, didn't he?"

She nodded. "The day—the day you thought Lacey Small had been there."

Cantrell said, "I was pretty blind. I'll never misjudge you again. There's not a dishonest bone in your body. It's funny Small made me realize that."

She rose and looked at him squarely. She was a tall woman, and he need not look down to her too much. "Rand, last night—telling you that. It was like a little death for me. I—I love you, Rand. I think I did from the moment I saw you. But knowing that my life was not my own . . ."

Cantrell put his hands on her, drawing her head to his shoulder and stroking her golden hair. "That's past." Then he looked down into her eyes and watched the last flood-walls of reserve burst beneath his caress. "There's the future ahead. We've waited too long already."

"Yes." She came to him as he had always dreamed she might, sometime. "Let's not wait any longer."

WANTED: KING FOR A MAN-BREAK QUEEN

By Don Holm

The muleskinner king of the mountains reckoned he'd broken his fighting honkytonk queen, and she figured she'd tamed him . . . when both rode into a high country jackpot—whose payoff was dynamite perdition!

BRYCE SINCLAIR rode down Hickok's single street until he came to the livery at the far end where he pulled up under a flickering lantern and dismounted. He stood rubbing his hand along the buckskin's withers while he waited for the hostler. When the man

He grabbed her and jerked her off the bar.

shuffled out he said, "Water, hay, no oats," in a crisp voice.

As the hostler towed the reins toward the barn the stranger added, "Hotel?"

"Down the street, next to Hell's Gardens," the hostler mumbled.

He stood under the pale circle of light from the swinging lantern for a moment, a tall, deep-chested man with blue-chip eyes, thinking. This is silly. Here I am, thirty years old, a businessman. This is no time to act like a fiddlefooted, hell-raisin' kid. He pondered this and made a quick decision. I'll take care of the business I came for and to hell with the other.

He called the hostler back and said, "I want the owner of the Ace-High Transportation Company. Where will I find him?"

"Him?" the hostler echoed. "Hell, man, it's a her! At least there's two of 'em. Kate Merlda and Garson Malloy are pardners now. You'll find Kate at Hell's Gardens, as usual."

As the hostler's words dawned on him, he looked surprised. Then a grin cracked his hard features. He said, "Thanks," and strode across to the boardwalk. As his booted heels clicked confidently along the planks he recalled, once again, yesterday's moment of irresponsible fun. . . .

On his way from headquarters in Mountain Home he'd camped last night at the Crystal Springs crossroads. By chance, several other riders had stopped there, too. Around the campfire someone had dug up a bottle. The talk gradually mellowed and then became boisterous. For the first time in five years he'd found himself relaxing and enjoying himself in the company of men, his business worries temporarily pushed aside.

Presently somebody had mentioned Kate Merlda, the hard-boiled gambling hall queen, who had the reputation of being the most untamed critter west of the Missouri.

"Hell," a saddle tramp put in, "once I seen a drunk miner try to get fresh with Kate. She broke his head with a whiskey bottle and plowed up his face with the sights of his own gun!"

"What Kate needs is a husband to beat her three times a day and four on Sunday!" a whiskey drummer from Helena piped up.

"Husband!" someone else guffawed. "Hell, there ain't a man a-livin' could harness-break Kate Merlda!"

Sinclair sat up unsteadily, swaying a bit from the unaccustomed liquor, and grinned like the unbridled kid he'd been when he first came to this country and before he had started his freight line. "Men," he said, "the way I look at it, a woman is just about like a mule. And I been breaking mules since I was knee-high to a crouch chain."

Laughter greeted his boasting and only goaded him on to declare, "I'll make you a bet. I'll have Kate eating out of my hand within a week or I'll buy each one of you a keg of whiskey—and the drummer here can supply the goods!"

"Be sure to leave your callin' card, pilgrim," someone laughed. "That's one bet I'd like to collect!"

"You can find me anytime at the office of the Intermountain Freight Lines in Mountain Home," he'd grinned. . . .

RIDING into Hickok tonight, with business crowding out the hilarity of the night before, his boast had come home to find a rueful roost. He had about decided it would serve him right to pay off and forget about this silly bet. Until the hostler, just now, had revealed to him the fact that Kate Merlda was not only a gambling woman but was also half owner of the Ace-High Transportation Company. He had ridden all the way from Mountain Home to have a showdown with Ace-High.

He turned in to the hotel and strode to the desk. A black-sleeved clerk turned

the register around and he wrote, *Bryce Sinclair, Mountain Home,* in a bold scrawl. He paid in advance, took the key and started for the narrow stairway.

A bearded teamster got up out of a corner chair and intercepted him. Sinclair halted and without looking at the man said, "Did our three-wagon hitch get over Lookout Summit all right?"

The teamster shifted awkwardly. "Hell, boss, we lost a pair of leaders this time."

Sinclair's features got hard. "How?"

"A stick of dynamite jist as the leaders hit the hump. The pull chain snapped and they went over the side. But we got in all right."

"Where were the two guards I sent with you?" Sinclair snapped.

"They was—too far ahead."

"Did you see who did it?"

"No, boss. It happened too quick. Jist as we got to the summit some jasper popped out of the bushes and tossed this stick of dynamite at the team. He got away while we was fighting with the mules. Never even got a sight on him."

"We know Ace-High wants that Big-Six contract bad, but we still have no proof that they're behind this," Sinclair said thoughtfully.

"Who else?" the other said quickly.

"I don't know. I intend to find out before I leave Hickok. You go back to the Big-Six Mine and take the return load as if nothing had happened."

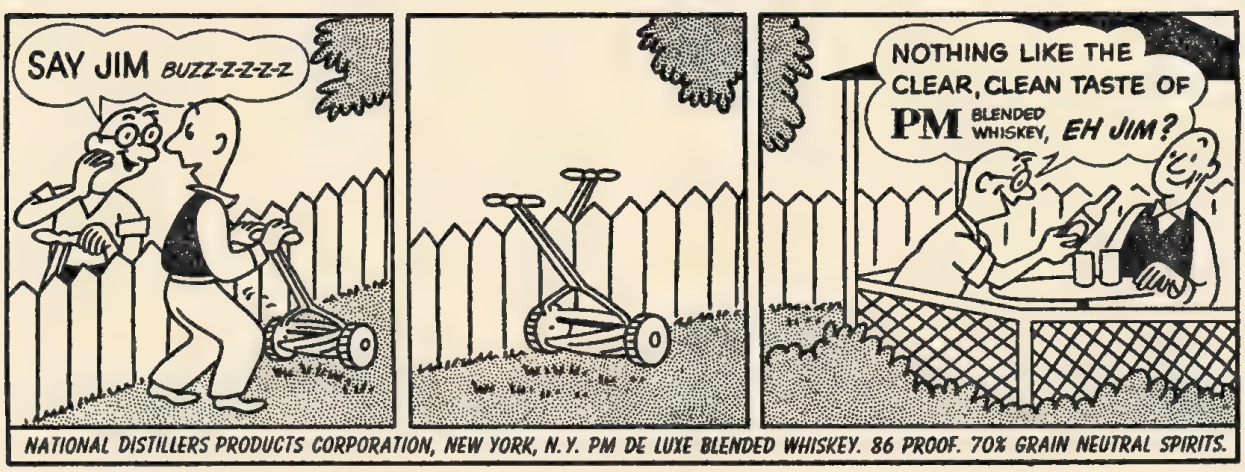
"What're you gonna do, boss? Maybe you need some help?"

Sinclair smiled grimly and said to the puzzled muleskinner, "I think I can still break a mule to harness without any assistance."

THERE was a crowd in Hell's Gardens tonight. The squad of girls was busy greeting patrons; the flabby, high-collared piano player fought a losing battle against the din of laughter and conversation; two extra bartenders were on duty. Sinclair took two precise steps past the batwings and stood with his feet planted, thumbs hooked in the tops of his levis. He thought, I'll know her when I see her.

His eyes roved over the crowd and presently alighted on a man and a woman conversing in a quiet spot at the foot of the broad stairs that led to the rooms above. His glance took care of her companion first: a sharp-faced man with jet black hair and long, narrow sideburns, whose suit fit tight across a solid trunk, whose pants were stuffed carefully into handmade boots. Sinclair knew Garson Malloy by reputation. A feed merchant nominally, whose aggressive operations now included saloons and freight lines. An unsavory character.

Sinclair had never seen Kate Merlda before but, of course, he knew of her as did every man in the Territory. His first look surprised him. She was small, almost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dainty, and still in her late twenties, with long, flowing red hair. He wondered what he had expected to see, and then reminded himself of his real business in Hickok. She and Malloy there were out to ruin his business.

As he watched he saw her nod to Malloy and start down the aisle between the bar and faro tables, a self-assured woman with bold strides that were somehow feminine. When she moved he saw that her daintiness was an illusion caused by the way she dressed. Actually, she was broad-hipped and full-bosomed and a stranger to coyness.

He saw a black-bearded miner, with all his holes loaded, step into her line of march and try to embrace her with clumsy arms. Kate, hardly pausing, planted a kick on his shinbone and, while the miner danced around on one foot, swung a wide open-handed blow that cracked on the side of his face and sent him sprawling against a card table.

The crowd in the immediate vicinity guffawed, and the miner got to his feet unsteadily, a sheepish but proud grin on his face. Kate marched on as if nothing had happened. It would be like that, he thought. Men going out of their way for the distinction of being repulsed by Kate Merlda. Like getting a medal for bravery under fire.

Sinclair went to the bar and ordered, and as Kate approached he turned sideways to study her with a contemptuous, calculated look. She saw him and their eyes met for an instant. He saw her hesitate slightly, saw a puzzled expression come into her shrewd greenish eyes. Then he casually turned his back and toyed with his whiskey.

He had lifted the glass to his lips when he became aware of a faint, penetrating perfume. He smiled to himself and finished his drink. Then he turned to see Kate standing at his elbow.

"I haven't seen you before," she said huskily. "Or have I—somewhere?"

"Reckon not," Sinclair said without interest, and turned back to the bar.

She slapped his arm with the back of her hand. He looked at her and saw the annoyance in her eyes.

"What's the matter, stranger, don't you like company?"

He examined her deliberately, sensing her increasingly perplexed anger. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a blonde, full-blown girl ambling by. "Sure," he said, "nobody likes company like I do."

He reached around Kate and grabbed the blonde's arm. "How about a drink, dearie?" he said.

The blonde said, "Sure, honey," took a second look at Sinclair and added. "You bet!"

THE blonde giggled and Sinclair circled his arm around her ample waist and squeezed her in beside him at the bar. "My name's Big Alice, honey. What's yours?"

Suddenly Sinclair felt Big Alice being jolted aside. Kate Merlda, the beginnings of fury in her eyes, now grasped a handful of blonde hair, pulled Big Alice away from the bar and shoved her on her way. "Beat it!" Kate said huskily. Then she moved up beside Sinclair and said, "She's not your kind."

"And you are?" he inquired.

"Maybe."

Sinclair poured another drink from the bottle and said to his glass, "I pick my own company."

He was aware that all this by-play had attracted attention, and that there was a shocked and expectant hush in the immediate vicinity, and that Kate Merlda's bosom was rising and falling with growing anger, and he grinned to himself.

"Not in my place, you don't!" Kate said. She grabbed the bottle out of his hand and nodded to the barkeep for a glass.

Sinclair shrugged and tossed a double eagle on the bar and turned to go. She stopped him. "You got change coming."

"Keep it."

"Mighty generous, aren't you? You must be in the chips."

"My last one," he said. "I like to start out clean."

She shoved the gold coin back to him. "Drinks are on the house, then."

"I always pay my own way—all the way," he retorted.

She smiled slightly. "What's your name, stranger? Don't I know you?"

He shrugged. "Just call me Skinner."

She laughed suddenly, and strangely enough he liked the way her eyes twinkled. "All right, Skinner. Now we're friends, huh?"

"Maybe."

"You're a hard man to get acquainted with."

"Maybe."

"I could have sworn I know you. Haven't we met before?"

"No," he answered truthfully.

"Looking for a job?"

"Maybe."

"Can you handle a ten-horse outfit?"

"With the best."

"All right, you got a job. Report to my office tomorrow. Ace-High Transportation Company. Pay's a hundred a month. Can you handle a gun?"

"That'll be two hundred a month," he said.

Her green eyes searched his face shrewdly. Then she smiled. "All right. We'll drink to that."

"Just a minute, Kate," a deep voice said.

Sinclair looked over his shoulder and saw Garson Malloy standing behind them, flanked by two big unsmiling teamsters. For a moment he was struck by the oddity of Malloy's deep voice, coming from such a thin face. Then he ignored him.

"Kate," Malloy went on, "I don't like it, you hiring men on your own hook."

Kate's eyes flashed. "I own half interest, don't I? Do I have to run to you every time I hire a teamster?"

Malloy tried to sooth her ruffled feathers but his glittering eyes studied Sinclair. "Sure, Kate," he said, "but, like you say, we're partners. We ought to work together."

"We need men, don't we?" she shot at him.

"Sure, Kate," he said moderately, "and we need men who can fight, what with Intermountain Freight Lines trying to ruin our business."

Sinclair lifted his glass to his lips to cover the expression he knew was on his face.

"We got to be careful who we hire," Malloy went on. "After all, we don't know this man. Maybe he's a spy for Bryce Sinclair."

Kate hesitated. "Are you?" she said to Sinclair.

He turned to face them, then, resting the small of his back against the bar and hooking a heel over the brass rail. He shrugged indifferently. "Keep your damn job. I didn't ask for it."

"I hired him and that's final," Kate said after a moment.

"Sure, Kate, but you ought to consult me. I heard you offer him fighting wages. How do we know he can fight? The Sinclair outfit plays dirty."

Kate looked at him again. "Can you fight?"

"What do you want for two hundred a month, the story of my life?"

Malloy's lips parted and he nodded slightly to the men on either side of him. "Perhaps we can find out?" he suggested softly.

Sinclair turned to Kate. "Your boys start anything, your place is liable to get wrecked," he said coldly.

Kate laughed. "If you're man enough to do it, I'm woman enough to take it!"

MALLOY nodded again to his two men and they started for Sinclair. Bryce waited until they had closed and couldn't dodge, then he lashed out with his foot and caught the first one in the groin, and with the same motion propelled himself away from the bar and hit the other teamster in the midriff with his shoulder. As he straightened up, he swung a hard left that caught Malloy unawares. Malloy's eyes popped and he crashed back against a card table. Sinclair grinned and rubbed his left hand where Malloy's blood was smeared on the knuckles.

The surprised poker players got to their feet, cursing. A woman in the crowd screamed and the place suddenly exploded in a pandemonium of excitement. The two teamsters had recovered by this time. Sinclair caught one with a low, swinging right just as the man got up, and stretched him out on the floor The other teamster had jerked a gun out of his waistband. Sinclair chopped across the wrist and drove a right into his stubbled face. Then he grabbed the gun and twisted it free and clubbed the barrel on the teamster's skull.

Hell's Gardens by this time was a roomful of riots. Fist fights had broken out, shouts and curses mingled with women's screams. He saw one dancehall girl standing on a chair, saw a man crash into her and send her sprawling to the floor. An empty bottle whistled through the air and Sinclair ducked. A gun exploded somewhere and a jam developed at the doors as some of the crowd tried to escape.

He heard Kate's husky, excited voice cry, "Go to it, Skinner!" Before he could locate her a cowhand staggered against him. He shoved him aside in time to see another teamster bearing down on him. He drove a hard right into the teamster's belly. When the man doubled up, Sinclair straightened him out again with a left.

At that moment another fist came out of nowhere and crashed against his temple and sent him sprawling to the glass-littered floor in a blaze of whirling lights. He rolled as he hit, just in time to avoid a heavy body coming down on him. He hit the body on the back of the neck to make sure it was through for the night, turned on his knees and grabbed the closest pair of legs and jerked their owner to the floor. He saw that the man was merely drunk so he let him lay and got up unsteadily.

He saw Kate Merlda sitting on the bar, her legs crossed, watching him with a wide smile. Her amusement angered him. He strode across to her and grabbed her wrist and jerked her off the bar. With his left hand around her waist crushing her to him tightly, his right hand grabbed a handful of her red hair and pulled her head back. He kissed her soft, moist lips so hard their teeth touched. And he held her until her first angry struggles ceased, until she stopped trying to twist her head away, until the last resistance slipped away and her arms went around his neck and her body melted against him. Then he released her suddenly and stepped back.

"I still like to pick my own company," he said. He turned and strode rapidly out the door, pushing aside two miners who were wearily trading punches.

BRYCE SINCLAIR came down the stairs stiffly, went into the adjoining dining room where the oil lamps were still burning in the early morning light, and sat down to breakfast. Through the window he saw a horseman race down the street and pull up at the hotel rail. He had just started eating when he raised his eyes and saw Alkali Henry, one of his men, standing under the arch, looking across at him. Sinclair jerked his head and Alkali came over and took the empty chair at the table.

"What it is?" Sinclair asked.

"Boss, we lost another outfit."

Sinclair brought his coffee cup down

angrily and the hot liquid splashed over his hand and onto the table. "Dammit, Henry, can't I leave the business for a couple of days without you men running it into the ground? I got a damn good notion to fire the whole crew!"

Alkali dropped his eyes and fidgeted; a big middle-aged teamster who was utterly loyal to his boss. Sinclair was sorry instantly and he said in a more moderate tone, "What happened this time, Alkali?"

"It was on the return trip from the Big-Six Mine. We were making the long pull to Lookout Summit. Jist before we got to the top two masked men stepped out with rifles and stopped us. They made us walk back downhill, then they cut loose the wagons and drove off with the mules."

Sinclair swore. "What about the wagons?"

"Wrecked. At the bottom of the canyon."

"That's the second complete outfit we've lost this month," Sinclair said. He was silent a moment in angry contemplation. Then he said, "Go back to Mountain Home. Tell the yard boss to arm every man to the teeth and double wages all around. Put two crews on every outfit and shoot to kill if anybody comes near another wagon. We're going to have a showdown with Ace-High outfit for once and for all."

"What are you gonna do, boss?"

Sinclair stood up. "I'm going to work for the Ace-High outfit as a teamster by the name of Skinner."

* * *

Bryce Sinclair was still burning when he stopped outside the door of the Ace-High Transportation Company office, located in a partitioned-off wing of Hell's Gardens. He forced a casual smile, opened the door after knocking, and walked in. Kate Merlda was sitting at the desk, dressed in riding clothes with her red hair tied up behind with a green ribbon, going over the books. Malloy stood at her elbow. His nose was red and swollen and he had a black, puffy eye. They looked up, startled.

Sinclair waved a hand. "Well, I'm ready to go to work."

Kate closed the book and slapped Malloy with the back of her hand and said loudly. "Well, pardner, what do you think of the men I hire now?"

Sinclair saw the shadow that crossed Malloy's face. But Malloy said, "I guess he'll do," and touched fingers to his tender face.

Kate laughed. "All right, Skinner. You'll take an outfit to the Big-Six in half an hour. They're loading down at the corral now."

He grinned and turned to the door. Kate stopped him. He glanced back at her and saw that her lips were drawn tight and her eyes were shrewd again. "Remember, Skinner, that outfit's got to get through without a hitch. We're competing with the Sinclair outfit for a long-term contract. We wouldn't want anything to happen on this trip."

Sinclair shrugged. "If you don't trust me send someone along." He went out and slammed the door.

THE outfit was loaded; the first Conestoga with nine thousand pounds, the second hitched behind with six thousand pounds, and the trailer with another ton hitched behind that. He walked down the line, checked the pull chains, sized up the wheelers, pointers, swingers and leaders. The hostler had acquainted him with the names of the horses.

He came back to the near wheeler, swung himself up, and grabbed the jerk-line. Then he heard a familiar voice say, "You seem to know what you're doing, at that, Skinner."

He twisted around and saw Kate sitting on the seat of the first Conestoga.

She had a rifle along and a sheepskin coat in case it got cold in the high country.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"You wanted to send someone along," she smiled. "Well, I'm it."

"I still pick my own company," he said sarcastically.

"And you're still working for me—or are you?" She was not smiling any more.

"Does Malloy know you're going?" he asked suddenly.

"No," she shot at him, and added, "I don't take orders from anybody. Is that clear?"

He shrugged and turned back to the team. He cramped the wagons out of the yard and headed down through the main street of Hickok and out upon the freight road that slashed across the Sweetgrass Plains toward the blue summit of Lookout Pass. Once on the way, and on the level stretch, the horses stepped along sprightly to the rhythm of the two sets of bells.

Sinclair swung a long leg over the near wheeler's back and slid to the ground and waited for the first wagon. As it went by he grabbed a brace and swung himself up beside Kate.

"Nice team," he said. "But I prefer mules, myself—" He cut himself off suddenly and busied his fingers rolling a smoke. When he looked at her she was watching him closely.

"Sinclair uses mules," she said.

"That so. Who is this Sinclair?"

"A damn' sidewinder who owns the Intermountain outfit out of Mountain Home. He's been trying to force me out of business by wrecking my wagons. I've lost three outfits to him already."

Sinclair tried to keep the surprise out of his voice, at the same time wondering what she was up to. "Too bad," he said. Then he added, "Only I heard it was the other way around. That Intermountain was losing the wagons."

She laughed scornfully. "Naturally that snake would try to cover up by claiming he lost wagons, too."

"You expecting trouble today? That why you brought the artillery?"

She looked at him strangely. "No," she said, "I don't think we'll run into trouble today. That's why I hired you, remember?"

Now what does she mean by that, he thought. But he only shrugged and kept his silence. He watched his team for awhile, thinking. Finally he tossed his cigarette away and sat up straight. He noticed then that her eyes had never left him and he grinned to cover his confusion.

"Skinner," she said softly, "you wouldn't kid me, would you?"

"What do you mean?"

"About last night."

He laughed. "Is this the famous, hard-boiled Kate Merlda?" He prepared himself for her outburst but it didn't come. Instead she turned her head away quickly and was silent.

Sinclair jumped down off the wagon, trotted ahead and swung himself aboard the near wheeler. He glanced back over his shoulder, saw her watching him and flashed her a brief mocking smile.

The freight road left level ground sharply and started up the steep grade toward Lookout Summit. When they came to the fork in the road that led east to Mountain Home, Sinclair recalled with a rush of bitter anger that the cause of all his trouble was that woman on the seat behind him. He remembered that Ace-High had started this war, and that he had lost five thousand dollars worth of hard-to-replace equipment already this month, and he had an impulse to have it out with her right now and take this outfit as part of his retribution. But he knew that wasn't the way to handle this. He had to catch them in the act, While he was mulling this over the road had narrowed and steeped sharply and the first of the many hairpin turns loomed just

ahead of the leaders. And his immediate attention was drawn back to the team.

He wound the jerkline around his wrist and just then heard Kate's voice, sharp and threatening, "Don't try anything funny, Mister Bryce Sinclair!"

HE looked back with shocked surprise and saw that she had the rifle to her shoulder, aimed at the small of his back. Her eyes were hard and her lips a tight line. The wheels rasped as the wagons began to cramp and he turned back quickly to the team. There was no time now to think this out.

"Haw, Della!" he yelled. Then: "Climb, Nellie, climb!" Instantly the well-trained outside pointer climbed over the pull chain and, without loss of momentum, threw dirt to help hold the heavy wagons in to the cliff. Then they were around and on the other leg of the switchback. Several short jerks on the line started the leaders on the gee turn.

The switchbacks came one after another and he had no time for Kate and his problem; handling a freight outfit was serious business with Sinclair, no matter if that outfit belonged to a company that was out to ruin him. Anyway, he had no time now to think about it.

Two hours later they were approaching the summit and Sinclair was bathed in sweat and jumpy from exertion. The leaders sighted the hump and redoubled their efforts. Then, as they came abreast a clump of piñon at the side of the road, Sinclair saw a movement, a dark shape hidden behind the foliage. But he was too late. An object sailed out in front of the leaders.

"Jump, Kate, jump!" Sinclair yelled.

The dynamite exploded. The near leader collapsed and, in a tangle of chains, the rest of the team shied in fright. Suddenly the wheelers stumbled forward on their knees and Sinclair knew the pull chain had parted. He shot a look over his shoulder and saw that Kate had fallen to the side of the road. Then he spotted the dark-clad figure running up the slope through the pines. He fired but at that same moment was thrown off his horse. He landed on his shoulder, rolling, and regained his feet at once. He scrambled up the low cutbank and started after the ambusher, shaking the dirt out of his gun as he ran.

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The ambusher had reached his horse, and mounted, but the horse headed straight for Sinclair before the ambusher got control of it. Sinclair dropped to one knee and tried for a long shot. He saw the ambusher's horse stumble and knew he had hit horse instead of rider. He got up and pressed his advantage. He was almost upon the ambusher before the latter had extricated himself from his dead animal. As Sinclair closed in, he discovered it was Garson Malloy.

Malloy whipped his gun around and the flash of it blinded Sinclair momentarily. He dropped to the ground and fired again. Then his gun clicked on an empty chamber. He jumped to his feet and rushed Malloy as he was scrambling to get away. Malloy swung back and tried for another shot and Sinclair heaved his empty gun, striking the other in the chest. Malloy grunted and his arm sagged.

An instant later, Sinclair reached him and pinned him down while they fought for the gun. With the sudden strength of fear Malloy twisted and drove his knee into Sinclair's groin. Bryce gasped and released his hold. Malloy swung the gun as a club and it struck him a glancing blow. Then, as Malloy turned the muzzle toward him at close range, he found strength enough to grab the wrist with both hands and turn it away, twisting it downward and away from himself.

In desperation, Malloy beat his head against Sinclair's face and tried to sink his teeth into his arm. Sinclair held fast and at the same time tried to break Malloy's grip. Suddenly the gun went off with a flash and a muffled roar. Sinclair smelled the burnt powder, felt Malloy stiffen and then slump—dead.

He stood up weakly and walked down the slope to the road. Kate had recovered and came to meet him anxiously. Together they went back to the spot where the wagons had gone over the cliff and Sinclair said, "I was wrong. We were both wrong. It was Malloy all the time, trying to ruin us both to make room for himself." He wanted to ask how she had known who he was.

She didn't look at him. She brushed herself off and said, "And to think I suspected you. I'm sorry, Bryce." She turned and said over her shoulder, "Will you take care of the horses?" Then she started down the grade on foot toward Hickok.

Before she had gone ten yards he said sharply, "Kate!"

She turned and answered meekly, "Yes?"

He grinned and held out his arms. "Come back here."

She smiled quickly and came back. Then, as she reached him, and as he was about to put his arms around her, she swung a small, balled fist that caught him a glancing blow on the cheek.

He grunted with surprise and sat down sharply. Slowly he put a hand to his cheek and looked up at her in amazement.

"That's for making cheap bets about a lady!" she snapped.

He expelled a breath. "Then you knew?"

"Next time you bet with a whiskey drummer, make sure it doesn't concern one of his biggest customers in the country!"

He said, "You knew all along!" Suddenly he grinned. "I had it coming, I reckon."

She knelt down beside him quickly and touched his bruised cheek tenderly. "Darling, I had to get that off my chest," she said softly. "Now maybe we can start over again—on the level this time."

"Still think I'm man enough?" he grinned.

"What do you think?" she said, before her lips reached his.

HELL RIDES HIS HOLSTERS

By Kenneth Fowler

When a kid who owned a proud, fighting name heard the words, "Your father was a cheap saddle-blanket gambler. He was no good!" he had to get Lily out from his sights before he could make a suitable answer. . . .

HE WAS tall, rail-lean, black-headed, with a long straight nose and blue eyes, and he looked tough, although at second glance you could see he wasn't a man yet, in years. Twenty, possibly, and maybe a year short of that. But when his eyes came at you,

Bowman swung up the boot.

they hit levelly, latent, it seemed, with some deep inner purposefulness that could only be guessed at.

He signed the hotel's register with his full name, Thomas Cargill Bowman, Jr., completing the signature with a flourish that dug the pen nib into the ledger's spongy paper and spattered ink up across his long, slim-fingered hand.

Apparently flustered by his ineptness, he brushed irritably at the spots, then, catching the clerk's grin, spun the book with nettled brusqueness, staring at the man as if expecting the smirk to change to a look of startled deference at sight of the name.

But the little bald-headed clerk gave it only an idle glance as he reached behind him, picked up a leather-tabbed key from a wall hook and flipped it across the desk top.

"Two-o-one," he grunted. "Room's two dollars by the day, ten by the week."

Tom Bowman laid a ten dollar bill on the ledger. "You didn't know my father?" he asked in a faintly incredulous voice. "Marshal Tom Bowman?"

"Sorry, bub. I'm a little new to these parts. Don't guess I ever had the pleasure."

"He was marshal here three years," Bowman said. "A time when this town was pretty wide open. He cleaned it up."

"That's fine, bub." The clerk dumped his pudgy frame back in the chair behind the desk and picked up a newspaper. He said, looking down at it, "Reckon Stage City's gotten itself a mite mucked up again, since."

Tom Bowman stared coldly down at him. "Who's marshal here now?"

"Name of John Huck. Good man. Can't do miracles, though."

"Ever hear of a character around here called Longshot John?"

"Nope, never did, bub. Try out at the bar. Nick Crosslin'd know, if anybody would."

Absently picking up the leather-tabbed key, Bowman swung about and saw a door marked EAGLE HOUSE BAR & DANCE HALL. He started towards it, thoughtfully twirling the key.

His week's journey by stage from Wyoming into this unfamiliar West Kansas country had left him with an edgy feeling of tiredness, and now he had a sudden moment of doubt, wondering if he might not have come here on a fool's errand. If Huck hadn't been able to catch up with this Longshot John, this cheap glory-hunting gunman who had shot down his father, what made him think he could? Good man, the clerk had told him, speaking of Huck. But suppose the clerk had been lying? Suppose he had been covering up for Huck?

Going down the step from the hotel lobby into the crowded barroom adjoining it, Bowman started walking towards the bar, his eyes set in a stare. Unless this Longshot John was somehow mixed up with Huck, the chances were he had long since pulled his freight from Stage City. On that, he'd see Huck and sound him out. Then, if Huck seemed on the square, he'd pick it up from there, alone. Somewhere, somehow, he'd cut the sign of this Longshot John. And when he found him, he'd kill him. . . .

"Yours?" the bartender said, and his eyes jerked up from the bar-top with a startledly blank look.

"Beer." He punched out the word gruffly, and for the first time took on an awareness of his surroundings. The barroom was long and narrow, but widened at the far end into a broad alcove, which, some sixty feet beyond a latticed entranceway, dead-ended against a small stage. Just inside the entranceway a roulette wheel was spinning with a low, humming sound, and in the pit below the stage a piano broke into a brashly melodic thumping and men began to drift away from the bar, towards the larger room.

TOM BOWMAN saw two girls in knee-length flounced skirts and black silk stockings start abruptly up from a table and head back stage. At the same instant a door outside the alcove bumped open and a stocky, florid-faced man stepped out and momentarily stood tracked, running an idling glance up and down the long cherrywood bar. Then, removing a thick-banded cigar from a pocket of his flowered waistcoat, he stuffed it like a bung-stopper in a corner of his mouth and began walking at a random, sauntering gait towards the bar entrance to the lobby. Tom Bowman suddenly wondered if this might not be Nick Crosslin. If so, he'd make it a point to talk with him, later. But first. . . .

Abruptly, the thought left him. A man was stepping down from the hotel lobby into the barroom, a tall, ungainly-looking figure garbed in rumpled corduroy jeans and an unbuttoned cinnamon-colored vest, on which a loosely pinned silver star dangled limply.

The man wearing the star nodded absently to the florid-faced man as they passed, and then he was starting slowly into the barroom, combing it with a cool sweep of apparently listless gray eyes.

Jerking around, Bowman almost knocked his filled glass of beer from the bar. He walked across to the man and halted. "Excuse me, sir. You're Marshal Huck?"

The man looked hard at Bowman. "Sir is uncommon polite for these parts, stranger. But you got the name right."

Bowman watched the seamed, tight-lipped face. "I'm Tom Bowman," he said.

Huck's eyes remained expressionless. He said, "Glad to know you. Hope you'll like our town, Bowman," and was wheeling away when Bowman made a quick reach and grabbed at his arm, swinging him around.

"Why, now, sonny, I wouldn't do that," Huck said mildly.

Bowman's voice was brittle. "Maybe you didn't hear it right," he said. "Bowman. My father was the marshal here—Tom Bowman. You must have known Tom Bowman."

Huck's tone had a flat, toneless timbre. "How long ago was that, sonny?"

"A year. Maybe a little longer. You must have come on here right after he was shot."

Huck's eyes flickered briefly. He said softly, "How many drinks you had tonight, Tommy?"

"Drinks!" Bowman stiffened. He threw his voice at Huck with a sudden lashing vehemence. "By God, you don't run me around, Huck! If you say you never knew Tom Bowman you're a damned tinhorn liar!"

"No drinks. Cold sober." Huck didn't raise his voice, but a corner of his flat-lipped mouth made a tight ring, with a tiny hole bored in the center of it. Huck said, "Sleep it off, sonny, and we'll talk about it tomorrow." His palm made a woman's negligent smoothing movement down his right thigh as he turned. Suddenly Bowman swung him again.

Huck came up high on the balls of his feet. He said, "Sorry, sonny," and Bowman let out a startled gasp, lunging for the blued-steel club swishing down at him.

He missed it, and it hit him across the temple like an easy slap. After that it wasn't anything much—just that swift burst of light in front of his eyes, and then the sudden dreamy falling into a warm, buoyant blanket of darkness. . . .

HE was stretched out on an upholstered leather couch in some kind of an office, and the florid-faced man was bending over him, and there was light from a green-shaded suspension lamp striking glints of silver from the man's long, wedge-shaped sideburns.

"Drink this, Bowman," the man said, and held out a glass.

"Huck," Bowman muttered dazedly. "He—he must have—" He stopped short. A red-headed girl had floated up beside the florid-faced man and stood beside the couch, looking doll-like in the frothy ballet skirt creaming around her silk-sheathed knees.

"Better drink first and talk later," she told him, and nodded to the glass in the man's hand. Her cool, sea-water green eyes were momentarily challenging, shuttling to the man; then, abruptly, her glance swung back to Bowman. "When Crosslin hands out anything free," she added acidly, "it's an occasion."

She had husky voice, and Bowman couldn't stop staring at her. A fringe of fine coppery hair hung in a low-cut bang from her forehead, and her face, slanting down a little sharply from high cheek-bones, seemed relieved of a faint hardness by a nose which tilted pertly upward at its dinky tip.

Bowman took the drink and downed it neat, still staring at her. The whiskey burned through him with a spreading warmth as he swung his long legs down from the couch, gingerly pressing the tender bruise at the side of his head.

"You'll do now," Crosslin said. He went over to a flat-topped desk and placed the empty glass on it and then walked back to the couch, his dark brown eyes laid on Bowman with a deliberate measuring look. "This is Lily Foster," he said with a curt nod towards the girl. "She's in my show." He looked at her and said matter-of-factly, "Get out of here, Lily. Tom and I have some business to talk over."

"First," said Lily Foster flatly, "let's finish ours."

"You're trying to put me in hock," Crosslin complained.

"Hah, hah, hah," Lily Foster said, spacing each "hah."

"Oh, all right, then!" Crosslin gestured brusquely. "A fifty-a-month raise, starting the first. But try and earn it."

"What do you think I've been doing, parading around in this outfit so I can be ogled by every whiskery saddle bum between here and the Pecos!" With angry vehemence, Lily spun around and rode mincingly on her high heels to the doorway, leaving a tantalizing odor of perfume in the vacancy behind her. At the door she paused and looked back at Bowman. "Whatever he asks you," she snapped, "don't do it!" She pulled at the door with a cranky jerk and flounced out.

"Damn her cute little ways," Crosslin murmured idly. His glance swung, focusing on Bowman. "Boy, I had a shock tonight, seeing the name of Tom Bowman out there on my register. Even your handwriting's a little like your father's."

Bowman's eyes warmed in surprise. "I'm sure glad to hear you say that, Mr. Crosslin. Your desk clerk didn't know the name. Then Huck—"

"John Huck," cut in Crosslin, "would rather see you in hell than in Stage City, Tom. Also, to you, the name is Nick."

Bowman stared at him blankly. "But I never met Huck before in my life! Why should Huck give a damn about me?"

Absently, Crosslin walked to the desk and poured another drink. Returning to the couch, he held out the glass to Bowman.

"Tom, your father was the best friend I had in this world. Huck gives plenty of damns—about both of us."

Tom Bowman took the whiskey glass. "So?"

"John Huck was the man who killed your father, Tom."

ABRUPTLY, Tom Bowman threw back his head and gulped down the whiskey. For a stunned moment he could only stare at Crosslin with shocked amazement; not until Crosslin had gently drawn the glass from his rigid fingers and placed it back on the desk did the liquor

seem to melt down the numbing constriction in his vocal chords.

"Huck!" he blurted. "John Huck killed my father?"

Grimly, Crosslin nodded. "John Huck —now the marshal of Stage City. But don't go getting ideas about Huck, Tom. Your father was fast, but Huck can pull faster than a sidewinder hits."

Suddenly, like flood gates bursting, Bowman remembered words spoken to him by his mother before she died. "A cheap gambler killed your father, Tom. A man they called Longshot John. . . ."

Dazedly, he told Crosslin that, then watched Crosslin's dark eyes harden slowly.

"Your mother told it to you right, Tom. Huck was just a cheap tinhorn at the Blue Stove, on Front Street, before your dad closed him up. Longshot was fast with a Peacemaker, and he was Mayor Turk Shagroy's man. Shagroy's always wanted a marshal he could control, but he was afraid to boot Bowman out without a legitimate reason. Balance that with the fact Huck's always wanted to be a marshal, and you don't have to strain yourself to get the picture."

Stiffly, Bowman stood up. He said tightly, "Thanks, Nick," and started towards the door.

Crosslin reached him before he could go out and clamped his shoulder in a restraining grip. "Listen, Tom. Take a little advice from a man old enough to be your father and don't go blabbing it around any more who you are. Another thing—better leave John Huck to me. There's a mayoral election in another couple months, and I'm throwing my hat in against Shagroy. If I beat him, I'll get Huck. And I'll get him right."

Tom Bowman's hand was pressed sweatily around the doorknob. He pulled the door slowly inward, his pale eyes hard.

"Two months is a long time, Nick. I won't promise anything." And he stepped out into the alcove, gently disengaging Nick Crosslin's hand from his shoulder.

* * *

An hour later, when he came down from his room into the hotel lobby, he saw the girl, Lily Foster, seated in a chair opposite the stairway, and when she saw him she got up from the chair and started towards him, walking with swift, determined strides.

Without her stage costume and the garish make-up she'd been wearing when he had seen her last her face contained a sweetness and gravity he hadn't noticed in it before, although the bank of bronze hair was still visible, curved down fetchingly from the brim of a black turban hat.

Her first words stiffened him to a startled attention. "I heard what Nick Crosslin told you about John Huck, Mr. Bowman. I listened outside the door. Don't ask me why. Maybe it's because I don't often see a face around here that looks both honest and innocent at the same time."

Tom Bowman stared at her. "Thanks," he said meagerly. "If that's a compliment."

"It's a warning." Lily Foster's voice was flat, low. "Nick lied to you about John Huck. John's as honest as they come. So is Turk Shagroy. Don't pull any chestnuts out of the fire for Nick Crosslin. You'd just get burnt."

I might get burnt listening to you, too, thought Tom Bowman warily. "Been long in the town, ma'am?" he asked quietly.

"Three months. And that's three months too long, as far as Nick Crosslin's concerned."

She had a grudge of some kind against Crosslin, that was plain. And what had happened between his father and John Huck must have been before her time

here. She was lying; playing Miss Innocent herself. Because it didn't jibe up. Nick Crosslin hadn't wanted him to go against Huck. He had, in fact, specifically warned him against it.

Politely, he lifted his hat. "Thank you very kindly, ma'am," and then, as he started to turn, she put out her hand and stopped him.

"I hope you're not going to be a fool, Tom Bowman."

He said stiffly, "No ma'am, I'm not," and then before she could say anything more he wheeled abruptly and started walking towards the door, leaving her to take that any way she liked.

A moment later, standing on the boardwalk in front of the hotel, he had a faint regret for the churlish sound of his words. Irritably, he shrugged off the feeling and swung right, heading downstreet. A girl like Lily Foster wouldn't be mixing in this business without some kind of a reason. Maybe she's John Huck's girl, he reflected darkly, and walked on, unaccountably irked by the thought.

A stocky man in levis and a blue wampus shirt was approaching him, evidently headed for the hotel, and he stopped.

"Know where I might find John Huck at this hour, friend?"

The man gave him an idle scrutiny. "Huck? He'd just about be starting his night patrol, now. Try the Randy-Dandy or Jack-Deuce. Block farther on. He'll be in one of them."

Nodding absently, he started on again, conscious suddenly of the unfamiliar drag of the heavy-butted Colt packed against his thigh. He had bought the gun a year ago, when his mother had first began to fail, and the doctor had told him it would be just a question of time with her. Even then he had had his cold, clear purpose; he had known what he would do with this gun, some day—when he met the right man. . . .

ABRUPTLY his thoughts swung back into the gray channels of memory. His mother, taking him out to her brother's ranch in Wyoming, when he was still just a kid in short pants. He hadn't known, then, that his mother and his father had come to a permanent parting, had decided to go their separate ways. Later, when he was older, she had told him how it was: His father a peace marshal, his mother not liking that, frightened by the uncertainty, the risks. But Tom Bowman, his father, had been unable, apparently, to adapt himself to any other pursuit. A set man, his mother had said. A fine, upstanding man, but set in his ways.

Then, when she had been lying on her death bed, she'd told him of Tom Bowman's death. Shot down by a common gambler. By this Longshot John, in a place called Stage City. "You'll have a good memory of him, son. And a name you can always wear proudly." Those had been her last words. That had been her legacy to him. A name. A proud, fighting name. . . .

Suddenly he was aware that he had reached the Randy-Dandy. He went inside, but Huck was not there. He tried the Jack-Deuce, two doors farther downstreet. A high back-bar mirror framed in bamboo paralleled the bar on the room's right side, and he was making his own parallel course along this marker, grimly studying the mirror's odd assortment of faces, when the voice came at him from behind, tilted up on a mild note of inquiry.

"Lookin' for me, Sonny?"

A quick buttery feeling attacked his knees as he spun around, throwing his glance towards the sound with a look of startled shock. John Huck stood under a wide latticed entranceway leading to the gambling layouts, his thumbs hooked negligently in his gun belt, his cold, mouse-colored eyes set in an expression-

less stare. The lawman said nothing more.

Tom Bowman measured the distance between them. Twenty feet. He thought of Nick Crosslin's words. Your father was fast, but Huck can pull faster than a sidewinder hits.

He watched Huck's hands and pitched up his voice. "You're a dirty fighter, Huck. And a damned dirty killer to boot."

"Just keep your hands away from that talkin' iron, Sonny," Huck said gently. "Now listen. I can stick a bullet in you, or I can tell you the truth. The truth'll hurt you like hell, but the bullet might kill you."

Behind him, Tom Bowman heard a swift scurrying of feet away from the bar, and felt his belly flatten coldly. "A dirty killer, and a dirty liar," he repeated flatly.

Huck's long arms dropped to his sides. "Listen, Sonny, you want it cold turkey, I'll give it to you that way. Now keep your hands away from that hogleg till I finish it. Your father was a cheap saddle-blanket gambler. He was no good. But I never knew till tonight that his real name was—"

Tom Bowman never let him finish it. His right hand jerked up to his gun, but Huck's was shucked before he could touch a finger to the butt.

He heard a sound like a door slammed violently and felt an abrupt, clouting blow against his right shoulder. A twisting gout of pain ripped through him then, and he clapped a hand to the spot. His chest suddenly was like a top-heavy weight, heaving him forward. He fired under his left arm as he went pitching down. It was all he remembered.

HIS first awareness was of being in a strange room, not his room at the hotel, but a small, windowless cubicle through which a tiny skylight filtered a vague, gray-toned light. A dull throbbing in his shoulder suddenly reminded him of what had happened at the Jack-Deuce. Well, Nick Crosslin had warned him. And like any damned greener, he had tried to cut his big gut anyway.

Gingerly, he straightened up from the straw pallet on which he had been lying and pressed a hand to his wounded shoulder. His fingers touched soft gauze padding, and testing gently, he was startled to find the wound neatly bandaged and taped. Mystified, he got to his feet and walked unsteadily to a narrow batten door, reaching for the latch grip. But when he pulled back on it, the door didn't budge. A sudden sinking sensation hit him as he tried it again, but the result was the same. The door was either barred or bolted from the outside!

He caught now a mingled odor of harness leather and dried hay emanating from somewhere in the building and logically decided this must be a loft over somebody's barn or stable. But whose? And how had he gotten here? Stage City must have a jail, and if Huck had wanted him a prisoner, why hadn't he taken him there?

His thoughts spun to the inevitable startling conclusion. You'd be a thorn in Huck's side as long as you stayed in Stage City. He muffed his chance tonight, but next time he'll make sure.

Below, somewhere, a heavy-hinged door squeaked loudly, and he froze suddenly. Footsteps sounded faintly, then died away. After a minute, he heard them again, light, quick steps, approaching the batten door. His eyes stabbed over the room in swift panic, but except for the straw pallet, the cubicle was utterly bare. There was nothing he could grab up and use as a makeshift club. Not even a loose plank or a stick of wood.

He flattened himself against the wall beside the door, kicking off one boot and stooping quickly to recover it. He plunged his fist into it, making a kind of improvised brass knuckle and at the same

instant heard the gritty scrape of a bolt being forced back. The door swung inward with a lazy creaking sound, and tensely Bowman swung up the boot.

At that instant, Lily Foster stepped into the room, and he lowered it with a startled gasp.

The girl's soft, gray-green eyes stared at him flatly, filled with a bitter accusation. "Maybe you'd better put the boot back on and kick yourself with it," she jibed at him. "I told you Nick was using you for a cat's paw. Now look where he's got you—all ready for the hangnoose he'll drape around your neck for the murder of John Huck."

"Hangnoose!" Tom Bowman stiffened, staring back at her in brittle astonishment. "You mean I killed Huck? I never thought—"

"You never thought—that's just the trouble," Lily Foster cut him off fiercely. "And don't worry, you didn't kill Huck. But Nick Crosslin will, now. And he'll get you hanged for it. Why else do you think he had you brought here and locked in this stable back of the hotel?"

"Nick—Nick Crosslin had me brought here?"

"Who did you think it was—John Huck? Nick saw his chance to use you, the minute he found out who you were. But he never thought you'd be fool enough to try and shoot John Huck any place but in the back! Now he'll do it himself, knowing you'll be sure to be blamed, after two run-ins with Huck. He'll claim he found you hiding out up here and locked you in. That will make everything just fine and dandy—for Nicky. A lot of Nick's games are crooked, and Huck's been breathing down his neck about it. Huck and Turk Shagroy have been making an honest effort to clean up this town, and Nick knows what will happen to him once they really get the ball rolling. So Nick's out to beat them to the punch." She looked at him, her voice lifting scornfully. "But of course Nick wouldn't want anything to happen to *you*. All you have to do is stick out your neck, and Nicky'll take care of the rest!"

TOM BOWMAN stared at her like a man recovering foggily from a drugged sleep. "Who put this bandage on me? You?"

"Yes. But I didn't dare stay here. I—if Nick ever found out—" She stopped on a quickly drawn breath, nodding to the pallet. "I found your gun in Nick's desk. I hid it there under the mattress, when I came with the bandages. You—you may need it—getting out of town."

Tom Bowman's eyes held on her, set in a vacant stare. Getting out of town. She had it all figured out. And figured wrong, as far as he was concerned. He thought of John Huck's words, and a cold anger gripped him. Your father was a cheap saddle-blanket gambler. He was no good. Huck was a damned liar! He looked at the girl, his voice flat, toneless. "Huck killed my father. You're not denying that, are you?"

Lily Foster stared at him with a curiously opaque look in her eyes that was almost pity. "Tom, you don't understand about that. Your father—" She stopped abruptly, her voice wavering. "Didn't—didn't John Huck tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Lily Foster started towards the door. Reaching it, she swung around. "Please . . . .You—you'd better get that from John. He had to go to Sioux Falls on some kind of business, but Ed Wilk, his deputy, told me he'd be back before midnight. Just—just stay out of sight. If Nick Crosslin comes here and finds you gone—"

"Let me worry about Crosslin." Tom Bowman stared at her stonily. "You're in love with John Huck, aren't you?"

The suddenness of her laugh, brittle

with hysteria, startled him, and he looked at her blankly.

"That's it!" she exclaimed in a shaky voice. "John's just the man I've been looking for—the kind who might see something more in a show girl than a low neckline and a pair of legs!"

Tom Bowman felt color splash hotly up into his flat cheekbones. He spoke in the hurt tone of a schoolboy who has just been rapped over the knuckles by the teacher's ruler. "Don't think I'm prying into anything personal," he said harshly. "But maybe I will have a talk with Huck, at that."

With her next words, Lily Foster surprised him again. "Stage City's a rotten town, Tom. Get out of it while you still can. That's what I'm doing. There's a lunchroom for sale over in Kansas Junction, and I've been hoarding my pennies to buy it." She swished around, flirting him a quick glance across her shoulder from the doorway. "Come over there some time and pry around," and flashing him a sudden smile, she was through the door and gone before he could open his mouth to say another word.

Her sudden exit left the room with a cold feeling of emptiness, but a tantalizing fragrance lingered, and a sudden queer thought entered his head and buzzed there, like a trapped bee. Loony, he told himself sternly. You're loony as a locoed steer.

Absently, he swung around and walked back to the straw pallet. His gun was there, just where she said she had left it. A moment later he went out through the unbarred door and came to a stepladder leading to the stable below. Down there, after a cautious look around, he stepped out into starlit darkness.

IT WAS nearly midnight when he came to the last place. He'd looked for Huck in every saloon and dance hall but the Gay Lady, at the corner of Main and Front, and now, halted outside the Gay Lady's blue-varnished batwings, he had a last moment of doubt, a wondering if it would not be better if he took Lily Foster's advice and pulled his freight from this town for good. There was something about his father, something the girl knew, and hadn't wanted to tell him. Something John Huck knew and would tell him—if he gave Huck the chance.

Or had the girl been lying? Maybe she *was* in love with Huck. But if she was playing cat-and-mouse with him, why had she let him out of the locked room up in the stable loft back of the Eagle House? Could it be that she—

He grunted, "Hell, no!" out loud, and with an abrupt thrust of his arm, punched through the batwings and entered the saloon. He started shouldering through the crowd ranked two-deep along the bar and reached the freer space beyond, where the gambling layouts were situated. And then he saw Huck.

The marshal stood in front of a window at the back wall of the room, idly following the moves of a poker game in progress at a table a few feet away. Tom Bowman started towards him. He was less than twenty feet from the poker table when Huck glanced up and spotted him.

For a bare second, Huck didn't move. Then, with no awareness of Huck's intentions, Tom Bowman saw him speak quietly to the three men grouped about the table. As if at some prearranged signal, the men scraped back in their chairs and rose, backing towards the wall.

HANDS idle at his sides, Tom Bowman paced on, pretty certain that Huck would make no play unless he did. He saw Huck start away from the window, coming to meet him. At Huck's fourth step a booming drum-stroke of sound beat into the room and the win-

dow's lower pane exploded in a shower of flying glass. Huck was like a man walking a tight rope, taking one last balancing step. Then suddenly he threw out a hand and dragged a chair towards him, dropping into it with a weighted abruptness.

A belated buzz of voices was filling the room as Tom Bowman sprang to the window. His foot shot up like a clumsy piston, booting out the remaining fragments of glass, and then he was over the sill and out, in time to see a bulky shadow moving away furtively behind a barrier of back-alley trash.

He called softly, "Now try it frontside, Crosslin," and the shadow suddenly blurred and a bright gout of flame leaped at him out of the darkness. He had a curious feeling of detachment firing deliberately at the flash. Then he fired twice again and farther back in the yard saw flame spear straight down at the ground. After that he waited a split-second eternity before the other sound came—a soft, flat thump, like a body striking earth.

At cautious arm's length he scratched a match alight against the wall of the saloon, then, when nothing happened, snapped it away from him like a tiny shooting star and saw it sputter out in the blackness. Moving on a half dozen paces, he struck a second match, and in the brief spurt of light saw the body, and bent down. Nick Crosslin had fallen backward and lay with his head half buried in an empty crate, his dark, amber-toned eyes staring upward with a look of glassy fixity.

Slowly, Tom Bowman straightened and walked stiff-jointedly to the front of the alley, re-entering the saloon by the front door. John Huck was still seated in the straight-backed chair in the gambling parlor, but now a table was pulled up beside it and a thin, sallow-faced man with black sideburns sat opposite him, talking. Huck's gauntly seamed face had a nasty pallor, and a bandanna knotted around his upper right arm showed a red, soggy stain.

Huck said, "Hello, Sonny," as Tom Bowman came up to the table, then swung his glance to the sallow-faced man. "How about a bottle and a couple glasses, Nat? This ought to be on the house."

"Sure, John." The man got up and strolled across to the bar.

Huck's phlegmatic, dust-colored eyes tilted up at Tom Bowman. "You went at that fast, Sonny. Crosslin?"

Tom Bowman nodded.

"Any luck?"

"He's dead."

A gleam flickered in Huck's drab eyes, then faded. The sallow-faced man sauntered back to the table, put down a bottle and two glasses, and quietly walked away.

Huck poured two drinks, pushing one across the table. Tom Bowman shook his head.

"I'll take it without that, Marshal."

"It'll be tough, Sonny."

"Okay. Get it over with then."

Abruptly, Huck threw back his head and tossed off his own drink. "Okay, Sonny—a kick in the belly and then it's finished. I tried to tell you this before, but you wouldn't give me the chance. Your father used to run Nick Crosslin's games at the Eagle. I never knew till today his real name was Tom Bowman. The name he always went under over there was Longshot John."

THE feeling in Tom Bowman's throat was like a frozen wire, drawing taut. Abruptly, the wire snapped, and his voice spurted huskily.

"Thanks, Marshal." His feet felt rooted to the floor, and for a moment he couldn't move, couldn't force out another word. His mother. . . .His mother had just reversed the names. She knew, but she'd wanted him to have that clean memory,

only it wasn't clean, and just his thinking it was could never have made it so. It was better this way, and a man could always stand on his own two feet and owe nothing to anybody.

Huck's voice broke through the thought. "Nick used your father, Sonny, just like he tried to use you. He got him primed up on brave-maker one night and had him go against me. I couldn't get close enough to gun-whip him. I had to draw."

Tom Bowman squeezed his voice past the painful wedge swelling in his throat. "Thanks again, Marshal. I'm just a born damn fool, I guess. But mebbe in time I'll learn."

He started to turn away. Huck's voice stopped him. "Wait a minute, Tommy. I could use a born damn' fool like you in this town. I need another deputy pretty bad."

A corner of Huck's mouth was notched in, almost building to a grin, and a warm self-pride came up in Tom Bowman suddenly. Now he knew, for sure; a man could run his own straight furrow, regardless of what his father might have been. And it was dangerous to worship idols, who might have feet of clay or glass.

He looked back at Huck, and his voice held a new strength. "I'd like to think that over, Marshal."

"Do that. Job's yours, if you want the damn thing."

Outside the Gay Lady, Tom Bowman stood irresolute momentarily, then, with a sudden decisiveness, wheeled and started upstreet, towards the Eagle Dance Hall. I'd like to think that over, Marshal. Why had he said that? A day ago he'd have snapped at such a chance. And now he was wondering. . . .

He was four doors from the Eagle House when he saw her, coming out, and almost at the same instant she saw him, and turned his way.

A curious giddiness took hold of him suddenly. She had on the little black turban, and she looked tiny and tired and a little helpless, walking along the street, alone, bathed in the hard glare of saloon lights.

Tom Bowman drew in a deep breath. Then he went on hurrying toward her.

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THE LADY WAS BOOTHILL'S BRUNETTE!

Novelette

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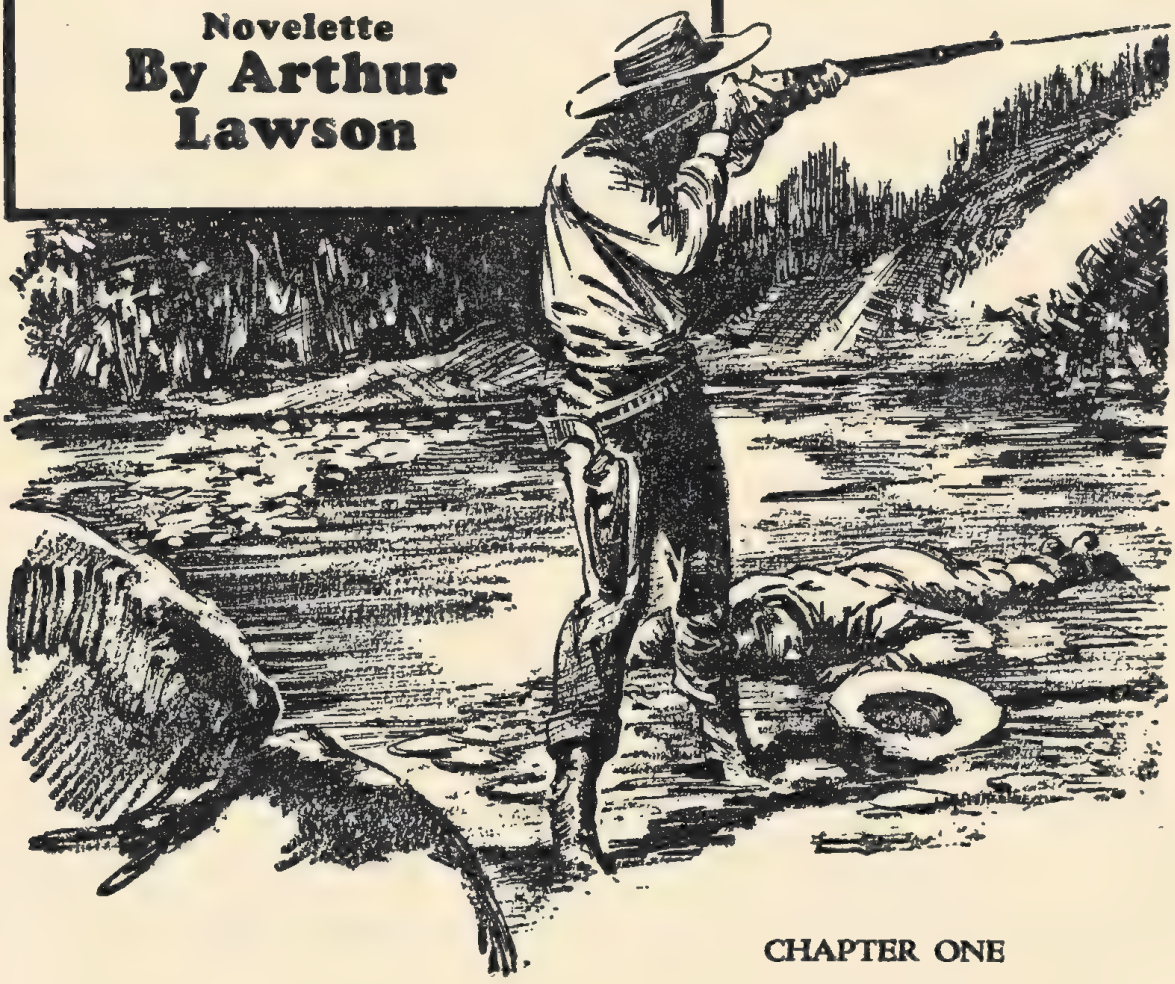

Danny Comstock could take his blondes or leave them be. . . . But to him the black-haired, clear-eyed temptress who had laughed in his bloody, beaten face was more deadly than the killer who waited for him in the grim and lonely hills. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Rot-Gut and Women

DANNY COMSTOCK did not want the girl, and if he had wanted her he would not have taken her away from Irv Keene. Danny would have gotten him a girl, not taken one away from him. But to the cowboys, railroaders and barflies hanging around the Stockyards Social and Political Club

He put a shot through Boston Bill's head.

it looked as if Danny stole Irv's girl with deliberate malice. None of them blamed Irv at all for taking a poke at Danny's jaw.

There were always half a dozen girls hanging around the club, willing to play a game of cribbage with a man, or waltz

with him, or drink as many ginger ales as he would buy at fifty cents apiece; and Irv had taken a shine to the one known as Dimples. She was a pretty girl with wide blue eyes, blonde hair, and an innocently frightened expression that was pure deceit. Whether he had been attracted to her by her girlish expression, or her lavish physical charms excitingly displayed in a low-necked silk dress, Irv never mentioned, because he was a man of few words. One look at her and Irv was lost. He settled her at a corner table in the club, sat in the chair opposite her as if guarding her from the world, and spoke his first word to her.

"Champagne?"

"Goodness, mister!" Dimples batted her gentian eyes. "Champagne at *this* hour of the day?"

Irv shrugged. He stared at her in a dreamy, doleful way as if he had never seen a female before, at least one like Dimples. Then he tore his glance from her and signaled the bartender.

"Champagne!" he said.

"Now, where in hell would I get champagne?" the bartender asked, disgusted. "Besides, Dimples don't drink champagne. Do you, Dimples?"

"Certainly I do," Dimples said archly. "And if this here gentleman wants to buy me champagne, you can send out for some. They got it at the Palace." She smiled at Irv and put a hand over her breast. "Just thinking of champagne makes my heart beat faster," she said. "Well, what are you waiting for?" she shouted at the barkeeper.

"Okay, okay," the bartender said. "What you drinkin', Irv?"

"Whiskey."

The bartender sent a barfly known as Boston Bill up to the Palace for the champagne and brought a whiskey bottle over to Irv's table. The whiskey was Old Buffalo, smooth and mellow and expensive. Though prohibition had been in effect for several years in Kansas, nobody paid much attention to it. In Pleasant City, once known as Hell Town, where the railroad was built close to the Indian Territory, the saloon owners merely took down their signs reading MIKE'S SALOON, or whatever it was, and put up one stating that within was the STOCKYARDS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CLUB, or the RAILROAD AVENUE FRATERNAL ASSOCIATION.

THE bartender poured a shot for Irv and a short one for himself. By now everyone in the place was watching the corner table. The other girls were green with envy, immediately bored with their temporary hosts and their flat ginger ale. Champagne!

"First one's on the house," the bartender said. "Anybody who buys champagne for one of the girls deserves the best. Drink it up, Irv."

Irv did not touch the glass. Irv was a big man, dark as an Indian, and about thirty years old. His hands were calloused with rope burns, his manner edgy, his eyes watchful as if he expected trouble. For the past three months he had been representing the Running O in a Big G crew run by Danny Comstock on a whiskey lease in the Territory. Irv's job had been to see to it that Danny's outfit did not burn the Big G on any calf following a Running O cow. He was very suspicious and a good man for the job. When Danny drove a bunch of steers up to the stockyards, Irv had trailed along, and so he had arrived, more or less a stranger, in the Stockyards Social and Political Club, and had met up with the exciting Dimples.

"What's the matter?" the barkeep asked, fingering his glass. "Ain't Old Buffalo good enough?"

Dimples answered for Irv. "Irv's a *gentleman!*" She put emphasis into the word. "I knew it the second I seen him. He ain't one to take a drink when there's a lady at the table without even an empty

glass. You can just *see* he's a gent!"

One of the girls snickered. Then they all giggled at once. Dimples stuck out her chest and looked very proper.

"That's right," Irv said.

"Well, I'll be damned," the bartender said. Appealingly, he turned to his customers in general. "Ever hear anything like that? Must be an old Indian custom. I *need* this!"

He took down his shot; and at that moment Danny Comstock strutted through the swinging doors. Danny was young and handsome. He had just gotten a shave and a bath and had bought a clean shirt. He smelled like a lilac bush in full flower. In one hand he held two champagne bottles. In the other he held the barfly who had been sent for the wine. Boston Bill was terrified. Danny grinned at him.

"Maybe you'd like to tell these folks what you told the barman up at the Palace?" Danny suggested.

The little man gulped a couple of times, then set his feet as if to go all out, double or nothing.

"Why—I told that gent—I told him that Irv Keene wanted a bottle of bubble water for—uh—for the loveliest little lady in Pleasant City."

"That ain't the way I heard it," Danny grinned. "All right, mister, buy a drink all around, and I'll forget it." Boston Bill nearly fell when Danny let go of his collar, and the big cowboy turned with a wide smile on his partner and Dimples. "Hyah, honey gorgeous." He pulled out a chair and sat at the corner table between Irv and the blonde. "Ain't everybody got a friend like Irv," he said. "Good old Irv," he said. "Good old Irv. Can't stand women. Won't even eat an egg because it comes from a female chicken. How come, Irv—"

Irv Keene said, "Beat it, Danny."

Dimples got rattled and leaned over the table to put a hand on Danny's mouth.

"Danny and me are practically brother and sister," Dimples said hastily to Irv. "I've known him since—"

"Beat it," Irv repeated.

Danny got half way out of the chair. "Now, what in heck is this all about?" he asked.

Irv said, "I got here first, Danny."

Danny laughed. "Why, heck, you got here last, Irv. Dimples has been wearing the Big G brand for the last year, ain't you, Dimples? Tattooed on her hip " He flung a reckless grin at Dimples, and she smiled back tremulously. "Show him, kid." He twisted the wire holding the cork in the champagne bottle and the cork popped out with a bang to bounce off the ceiling.

With a roar, Irv charged Danny.

IRV'S fist smashed against Danny's jaw while Danny was still holding the champagne bottle. Taken unawares, Danny put up no defense. He spilled backwards onto the floor, splintering the chair, and squirting champagne all over the room. Irv crouched over him, his face almost black with fury.

"You running along?" Irv asked.

Danny set up the bottle on the sawdusted floor. The room seemed to swirl about him. Irv loomed huge and dark as a grizzly above him. Jabs of pain shot through Danny's jaw. Danny reckoned he ought to get up and beg the big man's pardon for wise cracking about the girl. But the impulsive Dimples made that impossible. She dropped to her knees beside him in the sawdust and hugged his head close to her buoyant bosom. The throb of her heart was like the flutter of a bird's wing.

"Danny—Danny, honey—"

Danny was groggy as a sheepherder after a week's binge. He was hardly aware of the soft girl who held him so snugly or of her heady perfume. He did not even hear the bartender begging them

not to wreck the place. A crazy light had shot into Irv's dark eyes as he crouched lower, and suddenly Irv's hand shot out. Clamping his fingers around Dimples' bare arm, he wrenched the girl away from Danny. Dimples screamed and fell back against the wall. Irv jumped clear of the floor, his sharp heels aimed for Danny's face.

Danny managed to roll out from under that. He got to his knees, came up fast to butt his head into Irv's stomach. He got Irv square in the belt buckle and the sharp pain in Danny's scalp cleared his brain. With a quick one-two he pounded Irv's short ribs with both fists. Grunting, Irv smashed a knee into Danny's chin. Danny threw both arms around Irv's other leg and heaved. When Irv hit the floor, Danny kicked him on the side of the head and Irv passed out cold.

Danny staggered about, right into the arms of the barkeeper and a couple of other men. Without ceremony, they gave him the bum's rush, batting the doors open with his face, and shoving hard as he stumbled onto the boardwalk to crash into the stanchion of the wood-roofed awning in front of the saloon. He clung to it for support, yawed off and nearly fell on his face.

A hand under his elbow steadied him. Shaking his head to clear his vision, he found himself looking into the face of a man he had never seen before, a man old enough to be his father, with a curly black beard and dark, kind eyes.

"Thanks, mister," he said groggily. "I'm okay—now—reckon."

"Seady, son," the man said.

Danny's knees clattered together. Pain was returning to his face, but the film had left his eyes. An impatient girl's voice aroused him. "We're late already, father. Must you always bother with trash like that?"

Trash! It was a kick where it hurt.

Dan managed to lift his hat.

"Pleased to meet you, miss!" He knew his smile was crooked and that his face was smeared with blood. But he had to make some sort of gesture. "The name is Dan Trash."

The man who had kept Dan from falling over apologized for his daughter's manners.

"I'm afraid the rough ways of the west are alien to my daughter," he said. "But I know you'll forgive her."

"Father!" There was a clarion tone to the girl's voice. "We're late."

Dan had not even seen her until then. He turned his head slowly, and there she was, prim as a school teacher; a girl about his age, about five feet two, dark and lovely. She wore a severe suit of some dull gray material that somehow managed to make her figure look like a clothing dummy. Her mouth was set.

"Reckon I'm late, too," Dan said. "We all better hurry. And seein' as I'm goin' your way, I guess we can all go together."

The girl sniffed and, though her father's expression had not changed at all, he seemed to be laughing. The girl took off ahead of them and Dan followed with the older man. He was still pretty unsteady on his feet as he ambled along behind her. Her spine was stiff as a wagon stake, her shoulders severely squared. But she just could not help switching her hips, he noticed. There was a girl, a real girl there somewhere under the clothing dummy she presented to the world. It would be a pleasure, he thought, to melt the ice in her veins. . . .

DANNY COMSTOCK followed this strange girl into a new world. She led the way into the new church, a big, box-like affair recently painted white. The building was crowded, and everyone there seemed to be waiting for the girl and her father. There was a general turning of heads, a making of greetings, and a man in a dark coat and pants rushed up to bow

to them. He looked like a gambler to Danny, with his white shirt and string tie, a conservative gambler who would not wear a brocaded vest or gold chain across his chest.

"We've been expecting you, Major Ogden," this hombre said hastily. "And you, Miss Ogden."

The girl cocked an eyebrow as if to say, I told you so, father. Late, bothering with trash.

The man nodded to Danny, and he looked aghast at the blood on Danny's face. Danny put out a hand.

"The name is Trash," Danny said. "Dan Trash. Pleased to meet you, mister. I slipped in a bathtub, is all."

"Slipped in a whiskey keg," the girl said. "Meet Mr. Trash, Mr. Oates."

Mr. Oates shook hands because he could not get away from it. Danny gave him a squeeze that put the older man up on his toes, and then followed him down to the front of the church where a couple of spaces had been reserved for Major Ogden and his daughter. The major insisted that Danny take one of the seats since he was going to speak to the meeting and would be on the platform. Danny was beginning to enjoy this affair. He settled down and the girl sat as far as possible from him. Mr. Oates and the major climbed up onto the platform where a couple of other men sat. Danny grinned broadly at Miss Ogden. She stared straight ahead, very intent, while Danny admired her pert nose and her small but firm chin.

"How'd you like to be Mrs. Trash?" he asked. "I know it's sort of sudden, but then—"

"Can't you keep quiet?" she asked with severity. Then she added in a whisper. "I saw that—that—hussy—watching you out of the shutter doors. She was crying. I suppose you were fighting over *her*?"

"Ma'am," Danny said gravely, "I seen you coming. I was fighting to get out of there to—to tip my hat to you—"

Mr. Oates had gotten behind a sort of high table and was shouting angrily at the gathering.

"This meeting will come to order."

Miss Ogden's cheeks had turned a brilliant crimson. Her mouth quivered, and Danny admired her profile.

A quiet fell over the congregation. Danny edged over a little closer to Miss Ogden who could not move any further because she was already at the end of the bench. Mr. Oates took such a deep breath Danny thought he would burst.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Since the ladies do not have a vote in this benighted state and country, I am talking to the gentlemen chiefly. In a few days Congress will have been adjourned. A new president will move into the White House in Washington, D. C. and nothing will have been done about opening the Unassigned Lands to white settlement the way God, in His all-encompassing wisdom, intended it should be..."

THERE was more of the same. Danny was fascinated. Then Major Ogden got up and made a speech.

"What I suggest is that we move immediately, tomorrow, all together, into the territory, to make a demonstration—"

It was the craziest thing Danny had ever heard of. Without thought he jumped to his feet.

"If you'll pardon me," he said. "I just come up from that Territory. It ain't safe. It's full of whiskey peddlers, cowboys and soldiers, and I can say you folks wouldn't be welcome there. The whiskey peddlers don't want to lose their business with the Injuns. The cattlemen need that grass. And the soldiers got to kick off anybody who moves in. Thanks."

He sat down. Miss Ogden glared at him. There was a buzzing of whispers. Mr. Oates got out of his chair and beat the table with a little mallet. Danny

thought the table top had come loose and that Mr. Oates was trying to fix it.

Mr. Oates yelled, "Order!" He stared down at Danny. "And why, may I ask, don't the soldiers expel the cattlemen?"

Danny stood up politely. "Why, hell, Mr. Oates," he said, "outfits like the Big G that I work for, they lease the grass from the Injuns. A quart of whiskey a cow a year." He added, "Anything less than a year old don't count. Heck, we got calves down there big as three-year old steers." He laughed.

Danny sat down and the meeting buzzed like a bee hive. After a while the major got up and whacked the table with the mallet.

"I believe the young man has given us some valuable information," he announced. "Or we might call it *ammunition*. I propose that we go on tomorrow with our plans to invade the Territory. Any objections?"

Danny started to get to his feet again, but Miss Ogden tugged at his arm.

"I just remembered I have another appointment," she said hastily. "These dark streets frighten me. Would you mind accompanying me?"

It didn't seem to Danny that she could scare at anything. But her big, dark eyes were very appealing.

"Okay, kid," he said.

She hurried him out. At the doorway Dimples rushed from the shadows to fling herself against Danny.

"Irv's lookin' for you," Dimples wailed. "He's gone crazy, Danny. You got to keep off the street."

Danny chucked Dimples under the chin. "Don't worry about me, honey," he said. "I ain't scared of Irv."

There was a curious sound, a sort of *whoosh*, and the girl who was afraid of the dark streets stalked away alone. Danny shook his head.

"Who's the witch?" Dimples demanded.

"Nobody I'd fight over," Danny said. Inside the church a vote was being taken. Down the muddy main street of Pleasant City a couple of drunks staggered. A woman's laughter shrilled from one of the dingy houses near the stockyards. A bunch of steers in their pen set up a bellow. Miss Ogden skittered up the steps of the Palace Hotel, stiff-necked as usual under the flaring gas lamps. Beyond the hotel, Irv Keene was a dark shadow, moving slowly up the boardwalk, close to the building, toward the church. He had let Dimples lead him to Danny. Danny slapped her on the rump as if she was a horse. "Get in there—in the church, honey. And don't worry about me and Irv. I won't hurt him."

DANNY met Irv under the splotch of light in front of the hotel. Danny rolled a cigarette to keep his hands busy and away from his holstered pistol. Irv was ready to draw, in a state of tension the smallest move could make him crack. Danny spoke to him as if talking to a child who was throwing a tantrum.

"She's up in the church waiting for you, Irv," he said. "The grangers are holding a meeting. She's waiting there for you."

"It's you or me," Irv said.

"It's you, Irv." Danny lighted the cigarette "Go git her. My calico's in this here hotel. She looks like a dressmaker's dummy with a belly ache."

"Bah!" Miss Ogden snorted from just inside the hotel door, and flounced away.

Danny laughed. Irv scowled.

"I'm not fooling," Irv said. "You've had this coming to you a long time. You got a gun there. Use it."

"I'm not fooling either," Danny said. He flicked the cigarette into the gutter. He hitched the gun belt over his hips. "I've got a date inside this here hotel. If you're going to shoot me, get it over with."

Irv stared at him, swaying back and

forth, sidewise, as if his boots were nailed to the boardwalk and a big wind was shaking him. Danny was like a block of granite. A silent crowd was gathering, keeping away from any possible line of fire. Danny sensed that Miss Ogden had been drawn back by curiosity. Irv's eyes twitched. Danny cleared his throat.

"When you get ready to plug me, let me know," he said, and turning away from Irv, he climbed the hotel steps.

Miss Ogden stood her ground as Danny entered.

"Just like a couple of fighting roosters," she said disdainfully. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Danny patted her cheek, making her flinch.

"Just an old biddy hen, that's you," he told her. "Always pecking."

He left her blushing brilliantly.

The crowd flushed like a covey of quail, then settled at the ornate bar. Men pounded Danny on the back.

"There's a hombre with nerve," they said. Or, "Why didn't you plug him? He asked for it."

"He don't know what he's doing," Danny answered.

The starch ran out of him. He could have had free drinks for the rest of the night, if he had been willing to stand at the bar and accept all the praise and hero worship that was being thrown at him. But he wanted none of it. All he wanted was to shake hands with Irv, drink a toast, and forget. He shook off the mob, picked up his key at the desk, asked that a bottle of whiskey be sent up to his room, and retreated. Kicking off his boots he lay flat on his back on the bed watching the light from the gas jets in front of the hotel flickering on the ceiling.

A sharp knock on the door announced the boy with the bottle. He also had a telegram.

"I guess that desk clerk forgot to give you this when you come in," the boy said.

Danny tipped him. He had never gotten a telegram before. This was from Washington, from his boss who had spent the last month there lobbying to keep Congress from opening the Indian Territory to settlement.

WE LOST, GOT TO GET OUT IN THIRTY DAYS ROUND UP CREW AND DRIFT EVERYTHING SOUTH.

Danny stared at it for a long time. Then he said, "I'll be damned," and uncorked the bottle. After the third drink straight he lifted the lid and yelled down the speaking tube to the hotel desk. "What room's that Ogden chunk of ice in?"

"Thirteen," the clerk said. Then, on second thought: "Now, look here, Danny—"

Danny let the lid click down on the tube. In stocking feet, he trotted down the hall. Miss Ogden opened to his knock and immediately tried to slam the door when she recognized him. She had taken off the dress that looked like iron armor and was wearing a garment that Danny could not describe. It was a nightgown of white flannel, with a little eyelet embroidery around the neck, but since he had never seen a nightgown like it before, he had no idea what it was. Her black hair and dark blue eyes were in sharp contrast to the soft material.

"Go away," she insisted, pushing against his chest.

Danny handed her the telegram. For a moment she refused to read it. When it sank in that he had no intention of leaving, she unfolded the paper.

Danny watched her eyes slowly widen. They were a deep blue under the gaslight, almost purple, and the long fringes of her eyelashes were like black silk. All that hardness drained out of her. As wonder colored her features, the thin line of her lips eased and Danny saw for the first time the promise of her really gen-

erous mouth. She still stood with one hand against his chest, the other holding the telegram. He wanted to touch her, but did not dare to.

"Then—then—" Her wide eyes flashed on him in astonishment. "Then the Congress did pass that law. Then the Territory is open—"

"Sure!" Danny nodded. "Put on your shoes, kid, and trot up to the church. Your old man won't need to invade the Territory. He can walk right in while we walk right out."

To Danny she seemed like a little girl in her sudden eagerness.

"May I have this—" the telegram— "to show them?"

Danny put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around to face the room. Then—he almost did it—he almost sent her on her way as he had earlier sent Dimples to the meeting. Just in time he checked the impulse and shut the door behind her. Danny felt very queer.

HE WENT back to his room for his own boots and clattered down the stairs to the lobby. On paper borrowed from the desk clerk, Danny scrawled half a dozen notices.

MEN WANTED BY BIG G
to trail cattle
from the Territory to
TEXAS
Good chance to pick out
your homestead on the way.
Apply Daniel Comstock at Palace.

He glanced up as Miss Ogden trotted by, dressed again in the ugly gray suit. But somehow it did not look so stiff now, nor did she look as if she had been stuffed into it. She did not see him as she passed, and he went back to his chore. The barman in the Palace tacked up the note impassively, then took a second look of astonishment.

"What's the trouble, Danny?"

"Only this—" Danny gave it to him slow. "Seems Congress passed a law. They're opening the Territory to the boomers, Jack. We got to get out."

"Well—I'll be a son of a gun—" the bartender said dazedly. "Have a drink, Danny."

"Thanks," Danny said.

He put it down neat, and as he left the arguments started again at the bar.

"That's what comes of havin' a Democrat in the White House," one man complained. "Ruin the cattle business."

Another man chipped in his piece. "Seems to me the Congress is Republican," he said. "They voted the law."

Danny called a kid in off the street, handed him a dollar and his remaining notices.

"Spread these around, kid," he ordered. "One at the church, one at the station, and one down to the Stockyards Social and Political Club."

"What they say, Danny?" the boy asked. Danny told him. The kid's eyes shone. "Hell, can I go with you?"

Danny shrugged. The boy was about twelve or thirteen, barefooted though this early night in March was quite bitter. The pants he wore had been thrown away by some adult. The coat was turned up at the sleeves and very ragged. There were lots of kids like this around. Danny had been one, himself, before the boss picked him up and bought him some boots a dozen years ago.

"Sure you can come along," Danny said. "We'll need a nighthawk. You know anything about horses?"

"What I don't know, ain't nothing," the kid said.

Danny said, "Then run along. See you tomorrow morning at the Okay. Early."

Men were streaming from the church into the dark street. Danny stared at the crowd. He did not know what he was looking for, but he knew it was not

Dimples. He spotted her before she spotted him, and he beat a quick retreat.

CHAPTER TWO

Free Land—for Fighters!

IT WAS a wild night. It started off slowly, but once it got going it roared the entire length of Main Street, down to Railroad Avenue, and up the bluff to the big dark houses in the more select part of town. At first, as the news spread, there was no real understanding of what it might mean. Especially in the saloons where the cowboys and whiskey peddlers from the Territory gathered, the news seemed unreal. Congress could not do this to them. Congress could not drive off the cattlemen and move in the homesteaders each with his little piece of a hundred and sixty acres.

No, Congress could not push the cattlemen off. The cowboys would raise an army of their own and chase Congress into the sea . . .

While the cowboys blustered, the grangers, too, were puzzled. They had been booming for this law. Now they had it. And now that the free land was waiting for them across the border, many were frightened. As if they had been sitting in a poker game and had bluffed, they were called. They had to make up their minds to return to Kansas or Missouri or wherever they had come from, or take a chance on the unknown land that was now populated with wild Indians and wilder Texans.

It took a while for the facts to sink in.

Tired of the argument and talk, Danny went up to his room to wrestle with his own problems. This land hunger was a catching disease. It set a man to dreaming of a hundred and sixty acres of good bottom land—of a shanty and a woman—a woman with great dark eyes who had called him "trash." You could get sick as the devil from that disease and end up raising turnips, grubbing in the dirt, rotting away behind a fence.

The hell with it.

Danny took another drink from his bottle. It was no more help than the others had been. He knew what he needed: a horse between his legs and a cow at the end of his rope. He had been in town too long, that was all. So, as if it would speed the morning, he checked over his gear, stamped into his boots and folded the bedroll around the half-full whiskey bottle. He was buckling his gun belt around his waist when something heavy slammed against the door and banged it open.

Irv Keene stood there teetering on his toes in a manner peculiar to him. He looked uglier than ever. He looked drunk, but Danny knew he was cold sober and dangerous as an aroused sidewinder. Clinging to Irv's gun arm was Dimples. The girl was frightened.

"Came up to shake hands," Irv said. "Me and Dimples have been talking things over."

Danny did not trust him. He would have felt better if Irv had pulled his gun again and tried to shoot him. There was something incalculable about the man. But Danny tried to smile as if everything was all right now, and he put out a hand. Irv took Dan's hand, and Dan looked into Irv's eyes and it was like looking at Death.

"Me and Dimples are going to get hitched," Irv said.

"I'll be damned," Danny grinned. He pumped Irv's hand. "Good going, boy. You're the luckiest hombre in Kansas."

Irv's grip softened, and he dropped Danny's hand.

"You ain't invited to the wedding," he said. "Come on, Lucybelle."

Dimples cast Danny an unreadable look, the look of a girl who has done something very good, of a bad girl who has redeemed herself. He did not understand it. He

watched them go on down the hallway, out of sight. Then he picked up his duffel and left the room.

Striding down the hall, he almost knocked over Miss Ogden.

"I never—" she cried. "That all you two ever do? Fight over *that* girl."

"Get it out of your head, sister," Danny said harshly. "I don't fight over *any* girl."

He pushed on past her.

DOWN the stairs he went right into the arms of a welcoming committee. The hombre who looked like a gambling man was there, Mr. Oates. There was Major Ogden, and others that Danny remembered had been on the platform in the church. They surrounded him, took his saddle bags and bedroll from him, and rushed him into one of the small private dining rooms off the big main barroom of the Palace. Apparently these gentlemen had been studying Danny's taste in drinking likker. They had enough Old Buffalo there to founder the entire Big G ranch. Mr. Oates slopped some on the mahogany table, he was so eager to pour it for their guest. Danny glowered at the glass.

"What the hell?" he wanted to know.

Danny was practically a prisoner of these men. They had closed the door and all stood, waiting for him to drink his whiskey or pull out a chair. Mr. Oates licked his lips, and Major Ogden moved back against the wall with a smile.

"You tell him, Major," Oates suggested.

"Your idea, Reverend!" the major countered.

So he was a reverend, Danny thought. A preacher? Danny waited for them to break the news to him. Mr. Oates drifted around.

"We—uh—we would all like to join your organization," he said finally. "The major deems it impractical, but I—I mean —we—" Danny stared at him and Mr. Oates stuttered like a piece of wet firewood on a blaze. "We thought that, with your entry into the Territory, we could go along as, uh—cowboys, so to speak. We would, of course—" he said it fast— "require no wages. We might possibly be able to remunerate you somewhat for signing us on."

Danny did not like Mr. Oates. "Remunerate?" he said. "What in hell does that mean, Reverend?"

Mr. Oates' cheeks blanched. He put on a fatherly expression that was rather uncertain around the edges.

"Remunerate — pay," he said. "We thought we might pay you to hire us and take us into the Territory under the guise of herding cattle."

Danny glanced over at Major Ogden, and his lips curled.

"This joker belong in the deck?" he asked. "This little feller here a genuine parson?"

"Now, Mr. Comstock," Mr. Oates said hastily. "I hope you're not casting any aspersions—"

"I ain't got any aspersions," Danny said. "I never even heard of the critters. But I want you to know one thing, Mr., I got a job to do in the Territory. I got to take out the Big G beef before you grangers plow up the grass and butcher our meat. I'm hiring cowboys, not false-face psalm singers." Mr. Oates sputtered some more. Danny ignored him and nailed down Major Ogden with his steel blue eyes. "We're pulling out at eight," he said. "From the Okay corral. We need a cook, and we need a feller to keep an eye on the horses during the daytime. I got a twelve year old kid to watch them at night. You reckon you can spell him days?"

"Why—yes—" the major said. "And I think I could even find you a cook."

Danny said, "I'll be at the Okay. See you there." To the man who was guarding the door, he added, "Move over, chum."

DANNY rolled up in a blanket in the Okay Corral's hayloft and immediately was sound asleep. A dream plagued him, a dream that Dimples had found him, and that Irv Keene was stalking him, rifle at ready, and a hand stretched out to shake with him. This gave Irv three hands, one more than Danny could remember being possessed by the Running O rep and after a while Irv grew a fourth hand and shook Danny awake. There was no light in the loft, but over the strong odors of horses and hay came the potent scent of Dimples' perfume.

Danny thought about it for a couple of minutes. It was Dimples who was shaking him, not Irv. He could see her outline, moonlight reflected from the street shining on her bare shoulders. He could sense a sort of warmth spreading from her, and he wished she would just lie down and keep quiet. As for Irv, he could not place him.

"If you've come to invite me to the wedding, Irv," he finally said, "it's no go. You better marry Dimples while you got the chance. And tomorrow I ride south."

The answer to Danny's remark was the last thing he could have expected. Dimples flung herself upon him. She clung to him. She kissed him and whispered in his ear. She was a bundle of passionate abandon. Danny put a hand in the middle of her chest and pushed her away. Her long, golden curls dangled down over his face, and he sneezed.

"Poddon me," he said.

"Danny," she cried. "I'm scared."

"You got nothing to be scared of," Danny said. He would not sit up because he did not know where Irv was. He wanted to keep as much out of sight as possible. Dimples was a dark and very attractive silhouette kneeling in the hay beside him. "Irv's a good man. Now, run along, Dimples, and you've got my blessing."

"But I can't go through with it, Danny," she said heatedly. "I simply can't marry Irv."

"Then why the heck did you tell him you would?"

"Because I wanted him to leave you alone, Danny." Her voice was urgent with passion. "I've wanted you a long time, Danny. You've got to take me with you."

Danny forgot about Irv and sat up in the hay to get a better look at Dimples' pleasant face. Danny tried to put her off.

"You're a sweet kid, Dimples," he told her. "And I like you a lot. But if I was you I'd give up the notion of coming along with me. I'm too fickle for a girl like you. Foot-loose and fancy free. Fiddle-footed, that's me. If you can't take Irv, pick out one of these grangers and settle down on your hundred and sixty acres, kid."

Dimples' face was pinched like that of a young girl about to cry.

"If you won't take me, I'll follow you," she said.

"And if you follow me, Irv will trail you and bushwhack both of us," Danny said coldly. "It's no soap, Dimples."

The girl's voice became harsh. "You're yellow. You used to like me. You used to say I was your girl. You put your brand on my leg. Now you won't have me because you're afraid of Irv."

Danny was certain that Irv was somewhere in the barn. Irv, in the state of mind he was in, would have followed her. But the girl's words were a challenge. He got up and gave the girl a hand and led her from the loft. In the middle of the main floor of the big barn, he stopped.

"Irv!"

"He's not here," she said. "He took me home. I sneaked out the back door. I had to see you, Danny."

"Then take a look," Danny said, "because it's just about the last you'll get." He hustled her out of there. In the dark street, he added, "And next time you follow me, I'll put you over my knee and give you a licking."

She clung onto his arm. "I wouldn't mind," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

Jump-off

DANNY was jumpy and jittery. Every alley seemed to hide a demented Irv. But he walked with a straight back down the middle of the street, past the honky-tonks that were still going full blast, to the rooming house where the girls from the Stockyards Social and Political Club lived. These girls were hostesses, entertainers, and no man was allowed over the threshold of the boarding house.

Danny left Dimples at the bottom of the steps leading to the wide veranda that shaded three sides of the boarding house. She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely, pressing her lively young body against him for a hot, fervent moment. Then she ran up the steps into the house, and Danny turned away, dazed, puzzled. He understood only one thing about women, and that one thing was that he understood nothing at all.

He hesitated a moment in front of the club, changed his mind half a dozen times, and went on down the street. Dawn was in the sky, and men were beginning to gather in front of the Okay Corral. Danny stopped at the Elite for coffee, bacon and eggs, and a plate of potatoes and steak. With a comfortable fullness in his belly and a strange emptiness in the middle of his chest, he went on to the Okay.

For once, Danny had no trouble recruiting an outfit. It seemed that everybody was eager to sign up with him. In the old days he practically had to shanghai men, get them out of jail or from the gutters to complete a crew. Today he had his choice of a hundred or more. So Danny was careful. He chose men who had worked for him before. He took along Boston Bill, the barfly of all the saloons along Railroad Avenue, because Bill, when sober, was a very good cowpuncher. The kid was there, and Major Ogden showed up early with the "cook" he had promised to bring.

Miss Ogden was gotten up like a cowpuncher in pants and a shirt that left her throat bare. She was a little embarrassed in this get-up among so many men who all frankly stared at her. Danny grinned openly at her. Somehow the blue shirt and new denim pants made her much more feminine than her female clothes had. Danny would never think of describing her now as a clothing dummy.

"Miss Ogden," he said. "I never seen a better shaped pair of pants." She blushed brightly. "Or shirt. They sure do brighten up a dull morning."

"Mr. Comstock," she said. "You can call me Holly."

"Miss Holly," he said. "The name is Trash. Mr. Trash to you. And I'm sure pleased that you came down to see us off."

"All right," she said angrily. "I made a mistake. You *were* squabbling over that —that girl. And you *were* being thrown out of a saloon—Can't you ever forget it?"

"Sure I can," Danny said. "Easy. I can forget it as soon as you can. That—that girl," he added insolently, "that young lady has a name—Lucybelle Lee—and she's an old friend of mine."

Holly Ogden certainly could rouse him like nobody ever had before. She glared sharply at him and he felt like a fool scrapping with this girl in front of the crew he had just hired. Yet he could not seem to drop it, or to turn away from her.

She said, "My regards and apologies to your old friend."

"I don't expect I'll be seeing her again for a long while," Danny said. "But you'll be hanging around town. You can present your apologies in person. Now, you better say good-bye to your old man. Time we were moving."

Miss Ogden bit her lip, making it very red. She blinked her eyes quickly.

"And good-bye to you, too, sir," she said.

She wheeled away, kissed her father hastily and whispered something to him that made him laugh. Then she stood back while Danny organized his company. He lined up the men in military fashion, with the chuckwagon driven by the kid bringing up the rear with its hooligan wagon lashed on behind like a trailer. Danny rode along the column and told the men what to expect. He was boss, he told them. There would be no drinking, gambling or fighting. Work would last from an hour before dawn until an hour after dusk with a four-hour guard each night. It was a tough schedule. There was too much work to do and too little time to do it in. Everybody would be paid off at the end of the drive in Texas. And if anybody figured on quitting, now was the time.

Nobody backed out. Danny gave the orders and the column moved. Horses trotted out briskly. Danny glanced to the rear only once on the way out of town. He pretended to himself that he was checking up on the crew.

In the crowd hanging around the corral he could not spot Miss Ogden, but he felt a sudden pang of regret at having to leave her behind. He dropped back to talk to her father.

"Women are worse than preachers in a round-up camp," he told the major. "You reckon she'll be okay?"

"I'm not worried about her," Major Ogden said. "Don't you, Danny."

THE army looked them over on the way across the border and let them pass, and Danny drove ahead hard all day. They were a good forty miles below the border that night when they pitched camp and found the two girls in the hooligan wagon. They were dusty and hot from the long day's drive under a tarpaulin. Dan was so disgusted he marched them up to the chuckwagon and told them to go to work.

"And tomorrow," he told them severely, "the major'll take you back to Kansas. And if you burn the beans, you'll go back tonight."

Dimples was angelically innocent in the same low-cut dress she had worn while enticing customers at the club to buy drinks. Holly Ogden bowed mockingly.

"Yes, sir," she said. "We'll do our little best."

Angry, Danny walked out of camp. Though the girls had both been meek and mild, he knew there would be nothing but trouble from them. He found a log near a little brook and sat down to smoke a cigarette and ease his anger. One girl was trouble enough. Two was more than twice as bad. The only thing to do was to get rid of them.

Major Ogden found Danny on his log.

"I'll take them back," he told Danny. "I must confess, I'm not surprised that Holly stowed away. As for the other..."

"The other what?" Danny asked.

"The other young lady," the major said in an even tone. "As for her, I *was* a bit surprised. She seems so fragile and protected, I'd hardly expect her to do such a thing."

Danny stared at the major. Fragile and protected! The old boy really meant it! Danny had to laugh, and the tension rolled from him.

"Miss Lucybelle," he said, "is as fragile as a mountain lion—and needs just about as much protection. You better keep a good distance away from her."

"Why!" the major said in astonishment, "she's young enough to be my daughter."

"Sure she is," Dan agreed. "And big enough to be your wife, Major."

"She couldn't be more than twenty," the major argued.

"She don't need to be," Dan said.

He got off his log and went back to the camp with the major. The crew had gathered enough wood for a week's bivouac. Dimples was perspiring sedately as she fumbled with the dutch ovens. Holly Ogden worked efficiently making some sort of dressing for the jerked beef. The scene was less like that of a cow camp than Danny had known in a long time.

Danny went back to sit on his log, alone....

That night, while the girls were entertaining the men by singing sentimental songs, someone ran off all the horses. The kid ran into camp bawling the news, but the pound of hoofs had already told what had happened. There was not even a mule left.

"I don't know where they come from," the kid yelled. "All at oncet they was all around me."

"Where were you?" Danny asked. Then added quickly, "Forget it, son. You're only a kid and don't know any better."

Danny knew that the kid had been back in the brush watching the girls' performance.

With a coal oil lantern he went over the rope corral where the horses had been held. The animals had been stampeded due west where no timber grew for several miles and an open prairie gave the thieves a good chance for get-away. Other than that, Danny found nothing but a big suspicion. Back in camp he lined up his crew. Holly Ogden and Dimples crowded up to Danny, their faces worried.

"It was my idea," Holly insisted. "I mean the singing. These men, I thought they'd like a little entertainment."

"They got it," Danny said shortly. "Get into that wagon. You, too, Dimples. Hop!"

THE girls retreated reluctantly. Danny was so sore the anger was cold as ice within him. He lined up the crew to count them. Boston Bill was missing along with one more man. Danny's hunch had been right. Boston Bill and his pardner had come along just to steal the horses. But it was not the sort of exploit that the barfly would think of. Irv Keene's hand was back of it. Irv Keene brooding out there in the hills somewhere.

"Our main camp is south of here about twenty-five miles," Danny told the crew. "We'll start walking tonight."

"My God, Danny, that'd kill me!" one of the men objected.

"You signed on," Danny said. "Get yourself a sack of chuck at the wagon, and start hiking."

Danny's tone was soft, but the man backed out of the circle.

"Any more quitters?" There were none. Danny turned to Major Ogden. "Pick yourself a couple of men. Guard these wagons and our saddles and bedrolls. I'll send for them. And when I do so, I want you to hustle those two calico queens right out of the Territory—and I don't want to see any of you again."

Danny went over to the wagon for some jerked beef and biscuit. The girls were working like beavers, but tears were close to the lustrous eyes of Holly Ogden. Let her bawl, Danny thought.

"Irv know you were in that wagon?" Danny asked Dimples.

"Why, Danny! You don't think I told him I was going to run away with you?"

"No," Danny said. "I don't think so." She sure could put on the baby face. He shot the next question at her. "Was Irv talking to Boston Bill last night?"

She batted her big eyes. "They were talking about horses. But I didn't know they meant your horses."

"They mention cows?"

"Now, Danny, you act as if this rustling was my fault!"

"I asked you about cows."

"Don't you see she knows nothing about it!" Holly cut in sharply.

"Cows?" Danny said softly.

"Billy said they could clean up," Dimples said. "But, honest, I didn't know what they were talking about."

He thought, Boston Bill would report to Irv that Dimples had stowed away in the wagon, and Irv would do everything possible to get her back.

"I changed my mind about kicking you out," he said direct to Miss Ogden. "Put on your walking pants. I'm taking you ladies with me."

CHAPTER FOUR

Killer-Bait

WHEN Danny arrived at the Big G's main camp he felt as if his legs had been worn off to the knees. By traveling slow he had brought the girls through in pretty fair shape. He had had the luck to steal a horse from a boomer's corral, so the girls took turns riding the last ten miles. Another couple of miles, Danny reckoned, would have killed them all. His legs weighed tons as he dragged into the camp.

The boss down there shared Danny's opinion of girls. He wanted to send them back under escort right away. Danny, soaking his feet in a tub of hot water, disagreed with the boss.

"Irv has the horses. He'll start rounding up our beef to drive it into Kansas. He knows exactly where all our stuff is located. But he'll be kind of cautious as long as we have Dimples. He don't know what she heard. She promised to marry him, and he might have spoken a mite too free."

"Okay," the boss said. "We'll play it that way. We'll let Irv come for her."

Danny hobbled out of there. He ate a good meal at the cookshack and rolled up in a blanket under the canvas cover of the lean-to bunkhouse. It was another day before Danny woke up, and he approached it with cautious reluctance. Exhaustion had its grip on him so that he could not move. Weariness was a band across his shoulders and thighs, and his hips felt as if the sockets had been filled with sand. His knees burned and his feet were in flames. When he finally became conscious enough to roll out of the soogans he found that he could not put his boots on. So he crawled up to the cookshack for breakfast, stuffed himself amply, and sat in the sun with his feet in a bucket of water while he cut out some soft leather for moccasins.

He had not been there long when Holly joined him also with a bucket.

"Good morning, Mr. Trash," she said cheerfully, and plunked herself down beside him.

"Good morning," he said just as cheerfully. "I hope you slept well."

"Perfect," she said. "Nothing like a brisk walk before bedtime to put a person to sleep." She put her feet in her pail, and when she was well settled, she added, "You hate me. I don't remember ever being hated before."

"I don't hate you, miss," he said slowly. "I don't hate anybody. Not even Irv." For the moment he felt strangely wise and comfortable as he glanced about at this girl sitting on the ground beside him with her knees hunched up and her feet in a pail. She seemed to get smaller every day, and softer. But she had not faltered once during the long, hard trek through the territory. "When this is all over, Miss Ogden," he said, "you'll forget you ever met me, and I'll forget I ever met you."

"I won't forget," she said. "Ever!"

He missed the cue. "Because you hate me, I reckon," he suggested.

She hugged her knees, hiding her face, and he thought she was crying. When she straightened up her eyes were clear though misty, and her shoulders squared. She looked straight into Danny's eyes.

"Do you still think I look like a dress-

maker's dummy with a belly ache?"

Danny laughed. "Well, in that rig, well, it's like I said. It's the best shaped shirt I've ever seen, and it's getting better with wear." He cleared his throat. "Here comes Dimples."

"At least you have eyes," Holly said. "Who knows, maybe you got a heart, too."

Dimples tripped along merrily. After a couple of years of dancing all night with the customers of the Stockyards Social and Political Club, Dimples' feet could stand anything.

IRV had invaded their territory, all right. A crew sent up to Grand Forks to bring down the cattle gathered there found more than half missing. Another crew at Blue Bluffs found only cows and calves, no steers. And, because of the condition of his feet, Danny Comstock could not ride out in search of the man he was now determined to kill. He mooned around camp, limping in his soft, new moccasins and, as often as not, trailed by the girls as if they were a couple of pet dogs. Since Dimples' party dress had given out completely, they had fitted her up with levis and shirt from the commissary. This outfit only increased her air of innocence, making her look more than ever like a little girl playing at being a boy. There was only one thing that spoiled the illusion. A girl with a figure like Dimples' could never be mistaken as anything but herself. She could have glamorized a gunnysack.

Danny reckoned it would be a good idea to go swimming with her. He mentioned it the day that Mr. Oates rode into camp. Mr. Oates, forking one of the mules that had been stolen the night Danny's horses were driven off, looked more pious than ever, and smelled of whiskey. Danny asked him how he had managed to get across the border with the army checking up on everyone.

Mr. Oates had a ready answer. "I signed on with a Mr. Keene of the Runing O," he told Danny. "But I'm afraid I made a mistake. I suspect this Mr. Keene of helping himself to other people's horses and cattle."

"Irv wouldn't do that!" Danny mocked.

Mr. Oates seemed to take him seriously. "I don't know about brands, but this mule, here, this brand on him looks like the brands of the horses around your camp."

"Maybe we're the horse thieves, not Irv," Danny said. He laughed. "I'm nursemaiding these two fillies," he said. "Maybe you better talk to the boss." Nodding to Miss Ogden, Danny added, "Seein' she's a friend of yours, Mr. Oates, I guess Miss Ogden will help you hunt him up. Dimples and me are going swimming."

"Swimming?"

"Sure," Danny said. "We go for a dip just about every day."

Mr. Oates looked more interested in that than in looking up the boss. But Miss Ogden tolled him off and Dimples swung on Danny.

"He was lying to you," she said. "I'm sure of it. And I won't go swimming with you even if it is a hot day. I got some modesty."

Danny shrugged. He led Dimples down to the creek, away from the camp. There he lay on his back in the sand. Dimples sat down beside him.

"That was a funny thing to tell him," she insisted. "You know we never go swimming."

Danny did not care. "You accused me of being yellow, once," he said. "What kind of guts do you have?"

"You can't scare me. Neither can Mr. Oates—or Irv."

"Then you and me are going to make a habit of coming down here," Danny said, "until Mr. Oates gets back to Irv and Irv comes for you."

She shuddered. "You mean—you're going to use me for a decoy?"

"Sure," Danny said. "You and I will both be sitting ducks—killer bait!"

"Well, I guess I can take it," she said.

IT DID not take long. Mr. Oates pulled out early the next morning with the avowed intention of heading south. By giving various pretexts Danny got away alone with Dimples. While Danny loafed in the sand and Dimples waded in the clear stream they came to an understanding.

"You're in love with her," Dimples said to Danny one day.

"I'll marry you any time you set the date," Danny countered.

"You don't owe me nothing," Dimples said. "I got you into this. I'll get you out."

Danny sat up in the sand. This life was good for Dimples. She was getting prettier every day; and every day he began using her own name more than the one by which she went in the club.

"Lucybelle," he said. "I should of shot him that night he came after me, down the street. He's had this thing planned a long time. Riding with us as a rep, he was spying for himself. But that night he was using you as an excuse to kill me. Only I didn't know it then, and I wouldn't shoot a man over a girl."

"I knew it," she said. "I had to guess twice, though."

"Now," Danny said, "come here."

"I won't," she said. "I won't go to you—ever."

"I didn't mean that!" Danny said. "There's a kingfisher came up the creek and changed his mind. The squirrels in that old hickory yonder are sure mad at somebody. Irv Keene's laying his sights on your back."

The girl's face turned white. Deliberately she walked toward Danny. When she was up to him, Danny pulled her feet out from under her and dumped her in the sand. He had chosen his place well, behind a huge driftwood log. Rolling her up against it, he reached for the rifle he had hidden there. Methodically, he raked the woods opposite, while rifle bullets snapped into the log and dug geysers of sand behind him.

When he stopped to reload, someone up the bluff behind him took over. Danny crossed the shallow creek in a rush. Mr. Oates scurried out of the brush like a scared rabbit and Danny knocked him cold with the barrel of his rifle. For seconds Danny hunched down over the phoney parson.

"You killed her, Irv," Danny chanted. "Come on out and get what's coming to you."

A bullet whistled viciously past him. Danny had Irv spotted now. He waited, a wait that took forever. Down by the creek two rifles were dueling across the water. Danny found the one on this side and moved ahead out of his cover until he saw Boston Bill looking down a rifle barrel. He put a shot through Boston Bill's head and drew Irv's fire from the rear. Irv hit him in the shoulder, knocking him into a plum thicket. His back full of thorns, Danny howled. He drew another shot that missed him, but pinpointed Irv. He pumped three shots into a triangle the size of a big man's shirt. Then he sat down hard on the ground while the world whirled about him, and it was there that Holly Ogden found him.

Her pants were wet from wading the creek, her rifle barrel was warm, and her eyes held a strange mystery that Danny had never seen before.

She said, "I've been watching you and Lucybelle nearly every day, Danny. I just couldn't stand having you sneak off with her. I had to tell you."

"Skip it," Danny said. "She get hurt?"

Holly shook her dark head. "She went

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WARRIOR'S WOMAN

By John Jo Carpenter

The Walking S boss had ordered wipeout for Stud H, so Estes Hammond got ready to fight. . . . Their eighteen to his one—plus a pair of squaws who could do more than just load guns!

YOUNG Estes Hammond was thinking things over, taking that second appraisal of the situation, but it was a little late. A half year too late. Walking S slugs had them penned in, and the Walking S had lead to spare. The little adobe house was hot as hell and the methodical thud of bullets in the thick wall

He had stood them off, with the women's help, for a whole day.

was punishing to tightened up nerves.

"If I had it to do over again," he said to himself, cuddling the stock of the huge .45-70 rifle to his cheek. He was only fooling himself, but at the time he thought if he had it to do over again, you'd never catch him here. His 'breed wife, Althea, came wriggling on her stomach into the room, dragging the water bucket behind her. Thought of her angered him. She'd got him into it.

But when he turned and looked at her, dark and fiery and the only really beautiful thing God had made in this Panhandle, he knew it wasn't her fault.

"No, thanks, honey," he said, shaking his head. "You and your ma drink it. I'm not thirsty."

She sat up, scooped some of the precious water up in the gourd dipper. When she sat up she showed herself to one of the Walking S besiegers. A .45 slug whispered at her shoulder, fetching a snarl instead of a scream from her as it buried itself harmlessly in the wall.

Estes pushed her down, but she managed to save the water.

"Drink this, damn you, Esty!" she said. "Believe me, it won't do ma and me any good, if you go. All we ask then is one crack at Ollie Secord. Now, you drink! Maybe tonight we get some more, no?"

She talked like a man. She thought like a man. Yet, withal, she was woman all through, small, dark and delectable. She wore no more than the law allowed today, because of the smoldering heat in here. Yet even in jeans and leather jacket, making a cowhand beside Estes, she was all woman to the eye.

He drank reluctantly, though the water was like new life to his parched throat. She kissed his hand when he put the dipper back. He drew his arm away.

"Cut it out, Althea. No more of your fool Injun tricks. Now get back there with your ma and do the best you can. We can hold 'em off until dark, anyways. After that. . . ." Abruptly the man stopped talking.

She winked, still more mad than scared, and went wriggling back to one of the two small rear rooms. Estes had taken the front one because of the huge opening where he had planned to put in a big four-foot window. Too many of those Walking S men had tried to lay hands on Althea, at one time or another, and been cut or scratched for their pains. Because of her Kiowa blood, they would have thought it no disgrace to shoot her, and thus take out some of their resentment on her.

"If I had it to do over again . . ." he said again, kneeling below the big window, searching vainly for a target.

Thinking of Althea's mother made him transfer his anger to her. Certainly, Ruby Low Tree was no bargain as a mother-in-law. All Althea's life she had refused to tell who the girl's father was. Almost an outcast from the tribe, she had lived alone in this little adobe place, making and selling a little bad liquor, guarding her she-cub with a gun and an ax and a knife—until Estes Hammond came along.

Estes, twenty-two and full of pitch and vinegar then, was the first man who ever talked marriage. Old Ruby practically shoved Althea into his arms. Althea, spitting like a wildcat, stood up to be married to Estes with a knife hidden in her dress. Swore she'd get the white man her mother had sold her to. She went at Estes with the knife the minute they were alone.

Then she found out Estes hadn't bought her. Not a cent had changed hands. Estes had come up to old Ruby with his hat in his hands, promising Christian marriage, Christian treatment, Christian respect.

"Oh, Esty!" she said, crumpling to the floor, covering her dark, vivacious little face with her hands.

It was the first time the little 'breed girl had ever cried. It was also the last, as far as Estes knew. Eight months they had been married, and sometimes her will and

strength had scourged him like a whip, when his own showed signs of failing. It was Althea, not Estes, who had defied the whole Walking S time and again. . . .

IT WAS asking for extinction, anyway, when cocky young Estes Hammond squatted in that Panhandle valley and said, "I claim all the land I can see."

There were no land titles then. Nobody knew who owned that part of Texas, least of all the State of Texas itself. The Secord brothers had moved in first, and they claimed everything—yes, and the land next to that, too. Later, Texas was to ratify a lot of those "grab" titles after a token payment, because it was cheaper than calling out the militia to expel the squatters. When they squatted in those days, they covered whole counties.

Van Secord was dead, killed by the Kiowas sixteen years ago, and hatred and bitterness made Ollie Secord a bad neighbor to everyone. He was a worse neighbor to anyone who fraternized with the Kiowas. He had tolerated old Ruby and her she-cub because his boys liked their liquor now and then, and Ruby was thirty miles closer than the nearest ginmill. Besides, Ruby was an outcast, wasn't she? It helped spite the people that killed his brother, to let her stay there.

Ollie roared with laughter when they told him Estes Hammond had married Althea and was claiming Gila Valley and all the unbranded cattle therein. He could barely remember Estes, who had worked for the Walking S a few weeks. Ollie worked a small army of men, and how was he to recall one more or less?

"Registered him a brand, did he?" Ollie howled. "Calls himself the Stud H, does he? Wants all of Gila Valley, does he? Well, I'll say this for the shaver—he's got gall! The Gila's worth a fortune. I like the way that boy's nerve is primed. Have to ride over and see him one day."

He did, too. Ollie was getting on toward sixty but he didn't show it. He had a bald spot, but there wasn't a gray hair in his head, nor in his short-cropped beard, nor in the big, stringy mustache he wore. He could have married many a presentable woman, just on looks alone, and when you add to his handsome appearance the fact that he had no idea how much money he was worth. . . .

But Ollie had stayed single because he was a hard-minded man, one with a single-track mentality. Possessiveness was the itch that drove him, kept him awake nights. He wasn't just grabby; Ollie was a king-maker, with himself in the role of king. Stay out of his way and nobody had trouble with him. Cross Ollie seriously and he'd plunge his last chip to break you.

The idea of a bare-faced kid laying claim to the Gila tickled him. He made up his mind he'd do something for that kid. Maybe put him in charge of Las Ollas, a good job with lots of responsibility, but far enough from home so he wouldn't have that Kiowa 'breed girl underfoot all the time.

Yes, Ollie had plans for Estes. The Thorpe brothers, Anson and Jay, warned him to stay away. They had worked for Estes a few days, stringing a line fence to cut off Gila Valley from the rest of the empire of range claimed by Ollie. Then Estes' money ran out, and they went to work for the Walking S.

"That kid," they told Ollie, "is pure poison with a gun. Raised in the south somewhere, and anything that shoots, he can get along with it. Don't you low-rate him because he's young, Ollie. That kid is bad medicine."

Secord could believe them, too, because the Thorpes were about as unprepossessing a pair as he had ever hired. The kind who were always looking back over their shoulders, who spent a lot of evenings cleaning their guns when the other boys were playing poker. A couple of tarant'-

lers, the Thorpes, and if they called Estes poison, he was poison.

But that only made him more attractive to Ollie. A tough manager was what they needed for Las Ollas, anyway, for Las Ollas was a kingdom in itself, a self-contained ranch except that it had the Walking S brand, too.

SECORD rode in all alone one day, through the new line fence and down the well-marked pair of ruts that had replaced the old worn trail to Ruby's place. The kid hadn't done much to smarten the place up, but that wasn't a black mark in Ollie's book. Time enough for looks when the money was laid by.

He got over some of his laughter when he saw how many cattle were wearing the kid's new Stud H brand. It had ceased to be a joke by the time he got to the little adobe house. He'd give that kid holy hell first, then offer him a job, make him feel good. . . .

Old Ruby came out of the door with a double-barreled shotgun in her hand. There might have been no civilization in Texas at all, to judge by the squaw's face. She marched up almost to his horse, keeping that shotgun aimed at his belly, giving him a kind of a cold sensation there.

"Where's that Hammond kid—and put down that gun, Ruby, or I'll kick hell out of you!" he roared at her.

The woman advanced another step. "Begone!"

"Ruby!" he roared. "I want you to send that kid out here—Hammond, whatever his fust name is. Put down that gun or—"

He never finished the sentence.

"Begone or I kill you," Ruby said quietly.

She would, too. Ollie hadn't stayed single, healthy and rich by bucking savage plays like that. He rode out of range. He would have drilled Ruby without a qualm only he didn't know what kind of shot she had in that gun, and that left barrel was at full cock and would outrange his .45.

He sat his horse there and cussed her to everything he could lay his tongue to, leaving word for that Hammond kid to get to hell over to the Walking S while the getting was good.

Ruby took his cussing but she stayed in sight with that gun, and he saw she was alone on the place anyway. He kind of wondered what her kid had turned out like. Some of the boys said she was pretty as a picture. . . .

He went home. He was a busy man, and a big one, and a two-bit clash with an old squaw didn't occupy his mind long. He was hard up for dependable men, too, and he liked that Hammond kid's nerve. Wanted him for Las Ollas more than ever, since he saw the workmanlike way he had lined out what he called the Stud H. No, the Stud H wasn't exactly a joke.

The kid showed up, all right, sooner than Ollie expected. Caught up with Ollie as he was unsaddling. Threw a gun on him and told him what-for, and there were forty rowdy Walking S hands just out of sight in the bunkhouse, eating. But Ollie knew better than to raise his voice. One yell, and that mean-eyed kid would let him have it.

He tried to offer the kid the Las Ollas job and the kid told him what he could do with it. It was the first time anyone had ever turned Ollie Secord down, when he was trying to do a favor. Usually, folks came around *asking* for favors. This kid. . . .

"Once more. That's my property. Any of your stock on my side of the fence will have wandered there from over the yan ridge and back on my side of the fence. I'll shove 'em back or you can come get 'em if you come peaceable," Hammond warned.

"But once you're past that fence you're on my land, and you'll kindly please to remember that. And if you ever raise your voice to my mother-in-law again—if you ever use that kind of language around my place again, so help my Maker I'll kill you!"

Ollie's jaw dropped. "You mean you—you mean that old squaw?"

The kid flushed and it seemed to Ollie he might not be any too proud of old Ruby as kinfolk.

But he gritted, "My wife's mother don't have to take that from nobody. I overlook it now for two reasons: one, she asked me to; and two, you're a dumb, thick-headed old fool that didn't know no better then. But you do now."

He relieved Ollie of his gun and rode away, dropping the weapon down the trail a ways. He came in boldly and went out safely, and Ollie never said a word to anyone. It was a crack in his armor, the joke was on him this time.

But it ate into him like a cancer, and that night he told his boys, "We'll move in tomorrow and take down that fool fence across Gila and anything you see with a Stud H brand on it, shoot it. I'm t'ard of foolin' with that youngster."

His mistake was in only sending eighteen men over. They came in a clump and Estes Hammond was ready for them. He said, "Eighteen fools and not a rifle in the bunch. I reckon there'll be hell to pay but it's as good a time as any."

He sent them to cover. They tried to get around him, and might have, except that Ruby and Althea were on his flanks, slamming away with rifles. They ran the Walking S home so fast that word got around it was to be called the Running S after this.

Once more Ollie tried it, and this time he came prepared for war. And this time he left three of his men behind. Didn't even stay behind to bury them, and when word got around that Estes Hammond had to bury some of the Walking S riders, it was like pouring lye-water on Ollie's soul.

BECAUSE this time there were Kiowas with Estes—fifty strong. It was horrible to watch. There had been no trouble with the Kiowas for thirteen or fourteen years. Of course Ollie wouldn't hire 'em, but a lot of the ranches up toward the Oklahoma line worked Kiowa riders exclusively.

But it wasn't a bunch of cowhands, a bunch of tame Injuns, that rose up to to help protect the Stud H line fence. The Kiowas might have little use for Ruby and her 'breed young'n, but they took to Estes Hammond, swore him into the tribe, made quite a ceremony out of it.

And when they swarmed up out of that tall, rich grass that made the Gila so coveted, it wasn't pleasant. It wasn't even human. The Kiowas had kicked off their chaps and shirts. A few of the older ones had put on war paint.

They came hobbling out in their high-heeled boots, clad in levis at the bottom but bare from the waist up, and their throats were filled with the old-time war screams.

And Ollie's men ran for it again. They had Hobson's choice and they took it, because they wanted to live.

The Kiowas melted away, two or three at a time. Ollie took his licking and bided his time, for the first time in his life. All of his flaming hatred for the Kiowas had come back, and he could remember his brother, Van, more clearly than he had in years.

Van had been a good-looking, light-hearted, arrogant, carefree, cocksure devil. There hadn't been much left of his good looks when the Kiowas has gotten through with him.

It was months before the last of the Kiowas had filtered back toward the

north. They left behind a lot of branded Stud H cattle. On paper, the kid had a hell of a big fortune there, in land and cattle. He staked out a new house, back in the liveoak grove about a mile from the old adobe. He had hauled up two stoneboat loads—six-horse loads—of rock, to begin the building, when the Walking S swarmed in for the wipe-out.

And this time, there was only Estes, Althea and Ruby.

* * *

He had stood them off, with the women's help, for a day. The worst part of it was the continuous rattle of gunfire. It was a display that he understood, and Ollie Secord wanted him to understand it. It proved that those Walking S men could stand out there and whang away for weeks without running out of ammunition.

They didn't know, thank the Lord, how low they were on water. Only Ruby's well had been failing gradually. That was one of the reasons he had decided to start the new "big house" now, instead of waiting a year.

The sandpoint pump stood in one corner of the back room. They could pump up a gallon or two, and then they had to wait an hour or so, lately, for the pipe to fill again.

The well picked this time to go entirely dry. Every now and then he could hear the empty clanking as Ruby worked the handle, but no water came. All they had was the tepid dregs in the wooden bucket back there. If tomorrow was as hot as today. . . .

And it would be. It would be!

Now and then he could make out the Thorpe brothers, back there behind Estes' own wagon. They worked at this like old hands. They dug in, throwing dirt up against the wagon wheels, and made themselves comfortable in the shade. They had .30-30 rifles, and took turns firing, pegging away about one shot every minute and a half, just fast enough to keep him from getting a good lead on anyone over the window ledge. The Thorpes were smart.

Thud . . . thud . . . thud . . . The slugs kept pounding into those thick walls like the ticks of a big clock. He feared the Thorpes more than he did all of Secord's other hands. The others treated it like some kind of a picnic, yelling at one another across the house, making bad jokes about Injuns and squaws. The Thorpes kept their mouths shut.

Now and then he saw old Ollie circling the house. He tried two or three times to pick him off but Ollie had the range of that big .45-70 down to a yard and a half, and he kept outside it. Secord was no damn' fool.

Now and then Ruby would give a guttural warning and he'd belly back to the rear room with the long gun.

"See? Him there, him come in close, ha?" Ruby would say, pointing.

They knew he had that long gun in there but these fools would presist in trying to sneak inside its range to fire their smaller guns. Unlike the Thorpes, who knew they couldn't kill anyone with a .30-30 at that range, but who kept peppering away from safety, every now and then some fool would try to slip in from the rear.

He got two of them that way, in less than forty minutes that afternoon. One got it in the knee, and he almost left that part of his leg behind; a .45-70 makes that kind of a hole. The second one got that same kind of a hole in his chest. He didn't move.

"Ollie must have put up some kind of a bonus," Estes decided, when they kept up their fool sneak tactics after that. "Nothing but cash, plenty of cash, would make them that crazy. So I've got a bounty on me!"

THE thought drove him crazy, purged his mind of any resentment he might have felt at Ruby. An unlovely old hellion she might be, and certainly no prize as a mother-in-law, but she was smart and loyal, she could shoot and she had guts. A man didn't pick kinfolk for beauty in a tight like this. Ruby was worth a hundred other women.

It was Althea who gave him trouble. Toward evening, some of her fury went out of her. It kept seeping away and it puzzled and worried Estes. Althea had plenty of nerve. It wasn't her nerve that was fading. What, then?

Ruby, too, was keeping her eye on the girl. Ruby's brown face never showed much but Estes could tell she was worried. He was feeling a little light-headed, and he got to wondering what was going on in the old woman's mind, and from that he went to what she had looked like sixteen, seventeen years ago, at Althea's age.

"Ruby, how come you named her that?" he asked, making the fool kind of small-talk a man will in the presence of danger. A man's mind has to have something to chew on, or go crazy. Althea's a nice, gentle, lovey-dovey sort of a name. Althea's a little hellion and you know it. How come?"

"That none of your business," Ruby said shortly. She disliked any discussion of this kind. "You want to watch that girl or you don't have her."

"Ma!" Althea exclaimed.

Estes looked down at his wife. He felt guilty as hell because, a few months ago, he had felt resentful. Half savage she might be, and half naked like a savage today, but no man could ask more in a wife. Those calluses on her hands. You could go out and count Stud H cows that had acquired that brand while Althea was acquiring the calluses. Work like a man, until she dropped in her tracks. . . .

"Look, honey," he said.

Tears sprang to her eyes, because Estes Hammond had a streak in him like Ollie Secord—he was all business, and he thought more of collecting cattle and other necessaries than he did of pet names. He probably hadn't called her one more than two or three times since their marriage.

"Look, honey," he said awkwardly, "this thing ain't hopeless yet. They're waitin' for dark, but two can play at that game. I'll think of somethin'. Don't you do anything to yourself until you have to —until they get me or I tell you to."

He had taken it for granted she would kill herself rather than fall into the hands of some of that Walking S bunch. Particularly the Thorpes; Althea could remember how they had looked at her when they were here working for Estes. Estes hadn't had to tell her what she must do if he went down. No, he could count on her.

"That not what I mean," old Ruby said suddenly in a harsh voice. "Althea blame herself, she say you not get into this badness if you don't fool with Kiowa. She—"

"Ma!"

"Well, that what you think. I know—"

Althea jumped up and began running toward the front room. It filtered into Estes' mind slowly what she meant. He went after her, hit her low and brought her down. He saw both Thorpes rise, thinking the end had come.

The girl hit the dirt floor hard. Estes let go of her and clawed at his gun. The old .45-70 boomed, the thumb-thick slug smashed through the flimsy sideboards of the wagon, high up. Jay Thorpe took it in the head and went careening backward.

Whining with excitement, Estes worked the bolt, jacked in another slug and squeezed the trigger at Anson, who was tumbling for cover. He had to figure the

curving trajectory of the .45-70, which didn't blast a straight line like a .30-30. But he had that kind of a mind. The Thorpes were right when they said he took to guns.

He only saw Anson's rear end as he plunged into his hole, but he knew he hit the hip-bone by the crushing, splintering sound of the impact. It carried all the way to the little adobe, and so did Anson's screams.

ALL the rest of the daylight they had to lie there and listen to Anson scream that way. No one would come to him. They had too much respect for that .45-70. It was a load off Estes' mind to have the Thorpes off the list, but those screams, which grew weaker but kept on coming, ate into him swiftly.

And he had to keep hold of Althea, too. She wasn't satisfied with working like a man and fighting like a savage. She blamed herself and her mother, and she had the crazy idea that if she went out and gave herself up, somehow Ollie Secord would let Estes off easy.

He couldn't trust her. He had to sit there beside her, crouched against the wall, arguing over and over. He could count on Ruby for the back end, especially since he'd smashed the Thorpes. That had sobered the boys back there. They weren't anxious to tangle with that long gun. But they didn't know how handicapped he was in using it, with Althea hysterical and half crazed from fear for him.

They had been playing in pretty good luck, so far. Even Althea's plunge to give herself up had paid off with the downing of the Thorpes. But it couldn't last forever, and it didn't. It ran out just as dark fell, when his nerve suddenly caved in.

Anson Thorpe's screams did it for him. He stood it as long as he could. Then he went to the window and lifted his handkerchief on the end of his gun. Someone fired at it, and then came Ollie Secord's thundering voice.

"Hold your f'ar, you fool! He's tryin' to give up. I want to string him up personal—yes, and them Kiowa hellions with him. The next man that shoots—"

"I don't want to give up, Ollie," Estes yelled back. "I want you to do something about Anson. Put him out of his misery, if nothing else. At least give him a drink."

Ollie shouted, "An' trust myself or a man of mine to you bloody Injuns? I'll see you in hell, first."

"Then I'm going to do it. Hold your fire, because I'm leaving my gun behind. I cain't stand it no longer, Ollie. I'm comin' out."

"No!" Althea snarled, when she realized what he meant, when she saw how he was shaking and quivering each time Anson Thorpe screamed. She picked up a stone and swung at him, trying to knock him out. "Esty! I won't let you!"

"I'm comin', Ollie!" he sang out.

He vaulted through the window, thrusting the girl back. He could hear Ollie shouting to his men to, "Close in, close in—a damned Injun's got no right to a truce!"

If Anson had shut up, Estes would have turned back when he heard that, when he saw that Walking S crew rise up like a swarm of ants and move in toward the little adobe.

But Anson had heard a promise of help, and he heard Ollie damn it with that yell, and he began screaming worse than ever.

Estes lost his head completely. He shouted back at Ruby to cover them the best she could. Althea was running beside him, shoving his .45 into his hand. A man loomed up in the dark and he twitched the trigger and vaulted over the falling body, with the girl running lithely at his side.

He knelt beside Anson and in his rage

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Cold-Deck That

A Novel by

E. Hoffmann Price

All hell was banked to explode when Hobson took, as a last-hole gambling partner, the green-eyed woman who had orders from Boothill to cold-deck him to Purgatory—with his own pack of cards!

Tinhorn Temptress!

CHAPTER ONE

Two Bullets—One Window!

NAHASH BUTLER shifted his cigar stump, pulled down his brocaded vest and shoved out a stack of gold pieces. His narrow eyes challenged Jim Hobson, yet Butler seemed casual as he asked, "Can you see that one, Jim?"

Hobson pretended to study his four deuces. Sandy-haired, lantern-jawed, well-tanned, he gave the impression of knowing more about cows than poker, or about towns like Ojo Caliente.

Hobson fingered what little remained of his stock. "This pot's a mite heftier'n I

"You dirty son, let go of my wife!"

reckoned it'd be, but—" He fumbled in his coat and took out a Wells Fargo draft. "If this paper's good with you, I'm seeing your bet and raising you for the change."

One of the two other men sitting in the game chuckled. "Nahash, if he's got any more paper, you'll be having to call him with a bill-of-sale for the Eldorado." The other rose to get pen and ink so Hobson could endorse the draft.

What had begun as a friendly game in the front had become a business-like one in the back room of Butler's Eldorado Bar. It looked as though having won at the beginning would in the end trick Hobson into shooting his whole roll.

"See you!" Butler clipped. He snapped down four aces and reached for the pot.

Hobson flashed a .45 and bounced to his feet. "Hoist 'em, and get back from that table! My four deuces take this. Next time you sons use a shaved deck, be sure you've hooked a sucker." He grinned. "What this town needs is a square game, and that's what I'm opening soon as I can rent a place. Come over some time, gents, and I'll take you with straight cards. I'm keeping these crooked ones for a souvenir."

Keeping the three covered, he scraped the table clean, and while he expected to make a permanent enemy of Butler, he didn't anticipate the sort of showdown he was going to face, some months later, in the flat above the Bon Ton Millinery Shop, when Cornelia decided she wouldn't marry a gambler, even a square one.

* * *

Each time he looked at Cornelia he got fresh proof that good things come in small packages. The bracket lamp, turned low, left everything in shadow except the lounge and the patchwork cushions among which she nested. The blue robe, loosely gathered at the waist and flaring from the shoulders, clung to outstretched legs.

Cornelia became Hobson's future, all the future he had, all she had. But when their lips parted and her arms relaxed, the girl sighed and shook her head. "We can't make it for keeps until you quit gambling. I've been thinking of Jud Landry, just getting his house finished, just ready to take up the notes on his spread and send for his wife in El Paso, and then losing every dime in your place! How do you like your work?"

"He hadn't any business kicking up his heels," Hobson said slowly. "And if his wife married a fool, that's her lookout. I run a square game, and he didn't have to play. Amos Craig and I teamed up to run a square house."

"Oh, I believe you, Jim! But don't you see it's wrong from the start? No matter how honest you are, you're getting something for nothing."

"That's what Landry aimed to do."

"I'm always holding my breath," she went on. "Whenever there's a shooting, I'm wondering if it's come your turn. You made a fool of Butler, pretending to be a cattle buyer and taking him for a cleaning, and he's a stinker from way back. He's dangerous, Jim."

"So I should run out?"

"Look, Jim. You were foreman of a big outfit. Now, with the stake you've got, you could buy a spread and I'd be the happiest female critter alive!"

He scooped her up out of the cushions, and when she raised her face for a kiss he squeezed her tight. She went with him to the foot of the stairs which led to the shop below, and to the door opening into the alley. There she lingered. "Do look out, and don't laugh off what the honky-tonk girls tell me about Butler, they ought to know."

THE rising moon made the alley a pattern of light and shadow. Perhaps it was her warning, perhaps a gambler's hunch which made him sense that this

time he was not alone in the alley. He heard the *ting* of a tin can brushed by someone's moving foot. Hobson, mid-stride in stepping from shadow into full moonlight, shifted his balance and at the same time flung himself sidewise.

Flame poured from beside the rainwater barrel to his left front. Buckshot tugged at the skirt of his coat and pellets hammered into the dobe wall. Hobson's gun exploded. He rolled against the wall and went limp.

His assailant popped into view with his sawed-off shotgun. He couldn't decide whether to let well enough alone or cut loose with the other barrel. Hobson fired deliberately. The man doubled up and the second charge from his gun went into the ground. Hobson's next slug picked him up, slammed him against the wall.

Boots pounded the board walks. Hobson groped in the darkness of the doorway in which the gunner had collapsed. The building was vacant, the door ajar. Hobson bundled the fellow over the threshold and shut the door. He crouched to listen, to find out whether those who approached expected to find him dead or whether they were merely curious.

He learned only that those who came were puzzled by apparent lack either of victim or killer. They made so much noise they couldn't hear the groaning of the man beside whom Hobson knelt. When they went away, he said, "Mister, whether a doctor can do you any good or not is something I can't guess, but you're staying here till you tell me who put you up to this deal."

Hobson cocked his pistol and jammed it to the man's ear. "Speak up while you can!"

The bushwhacker shuddered, clawed his shirt front and went limp. Hobson struck a match. He wasn't an Ojo Caliente man, but someone passing through who had apparently undertaken what had seemed to be an easy job. Hobson went through the pockets. He found five twenty dollar gold pieces, new ones, all of the same date. There were two letters addressed to *Pinto Briggs, Cross Plains, New Mexico.* Long way from home, and judging from the boots, he'd come by stage, not saddle; no sweat caking or horsehair on them.

Hobson dropped the coins into his vest pocket and then moved slowly and silently from the house and on to Main Street. He stepped into Butler's Eldorado, whose barn-like expanse had room for dance floor as well as roulette wheels, faro layouts and poker tables. Butler's back was turned when Hobson stepped up to him.

"Keno!" Hobson shouted.

Butler whipped about. His mouth went tight. "Hello, Jim. Taking a night off to give us a play?"

Hobson dipped the gold pieces from his pocket. "Here's your money, Nahash. The man didn't earn it. The first time we tangled, I told you a square deal pays best. If you want me smoked out, try doing it square. You'll have a better chance. I told that man I'd whip him to death if he didn't speak up, so he talked a mite before he passed out. When do you want to settle this, Nahash?"

"If you have proof I sent a man to smoke you out," Butler said evenly, "go tell the law. If you think it's healthy to force a fight, go to it."

Hobson looked around at Butler's housemen, and laughed, "I'm not a damn fool!" he snapped. "But if ever just the two of us meet alone, don't bother talking, just reach—and reach quick!" He strolled to the front and out the batwings.

Hobson found the marshal, old Jubal Chase, and reported his side of the fracas. Chase said, "Running a straight game is hunkydory, only you're too damn noisy about it. You say the man with the shotgun is lying in Garcia's empty store building?"

"Want me to go with you?"

"I can find him, all right. You run

along. Meanwhile, you get offen your high hoss. That lady friend of yourn is looking worried and getting spookier'n a cat walking on eggs."

THE following evening, before dusk, Hobson went to the millinery shop to help Cornelia put up the shutters. When they were alone he said, "Honey, I'm sorry about last night."

After a moment the girl said slowly. "Never mind the shutters, Jim. Sit down."

She was silent for a moment. Then: "You didn't get the news?"

"What news? I talked to Jubal Chase about the shooting last night."

"That's not what I mean. They brought Jud Landry in on the ten o'clock stage this morning."

"Brought him in?"

"He'd tried to hold it up and did a poor job. He was trying to make good his losses. Jim, gambling is gunning." She thumbed the latch. "You have to choose between me and a stack of chips."

"You would call my hand," he said fiercely, "right when I can't quit. You're as good as teaming up with Butler! I'd be a pretty customer, backing out now."

"I'm willing to sell out my shop," she answered. "We'd both leave, and who cares what Ojo Caliente thinks?"

"It's that fool Landry and his widow you're crying about!"

"You know it's much more than that. A matter of principle."

She opened the door a little further.

"I'm playing out my stack," he said, and raised his hat. "Good luck in playing yours!"

* * *

Two weeks later Craig cornered Hobson. "Jim, we aren't doing as well as we might. We get the customers but Butler is getting the profits. We've got to do something."

Hobson eyed his partner's deeply lined face. "You mean my card sense isn't what it used to be?"

"Ummm . . . even a square place has to make a profit. You better trot some gal down to Cornelia's to try on half a dozen hats. Sort of hone up some new interests and quit being absent-minded."

"Not a chance of making her jealous or sorry. You hinting for me to sell out to you, or to buy you out?"

"Get your feathers down, Jim! I'd look kind of funny, busting up with a fellow that plays it square. What I been getting at is this: the Eldorado's put two more gals at the faro layouts, and they're something to look at."

"I bet."

"Well, they draw a crowd, they get a play."

"So you want a female keeper of the tiger?"

"Sure would help."

"You mean, a female gambler, or just a come-on to fumble a faro box and trim the customers with a smile? Shucks, that'd hardly be cheating, they'd know they're being slickered." He grinned.

Craig looked relieved. "I'm sure glad you're not being hair-splitting about this."

"Got one spotted?"

"Been inquiring around, out of town. Looking for someone well spoken, sort of refined and educated. We don't want no Calamity Janes!"

The prospect of a new face in Ojo Caliente gave Hobson a thrill of anticipation. He spent less time thinking of Cornelia, condemning her stubbornness, and justifying his own stand. Now that he was looking forward again, he began to realize how much he had been looking back.

Finally the lady gambler arrived: a well-shaped person, somewhat taller than Cornelia, and redhaired. Hobson knew this was the prize the moment she came into the hotel lobby. Her perfume prodded his pulse to a gallop. Despite the dust and

jouncing of the stage, she was fresh and eager. The long-lashed greenish eyes, surveying the dingy surroundings, remained undismayed—and they brightened with interest at sight of Hobson.

Once she went to her room on the second floor, Hobson was the first who crowded up for a look at the register. She had written, *Alma Fraser, New Orleans.* And as an afterthought, she had corrected the entry to read, *Ojo Caliente.*

That evening he met Alma and Craig in the hotel dining room, where he learned that this was indeed the lady who was to keep the tiger. Craig said, "Alma has a lot to learn. Fact is, she hasn't quite the experience I'd figured. So it's up to you to teach her the lines."

This, Hobson figured, was perfect. Alma's smile and eyes were hard to read. It was as though he saw her through many veils. He anticipated peeling them off, one by one. The pleasant and exciting prospect made him give Craig a fixed look, and say, "School starts here and now, Amos. We'll be seeing you before business picks up too much. I mean, I'll be seeing you. She needs a resting up from the trip."

AT THE door of the hotel a livery rig which Hobson had ordered during the three-cornered meal was waiting. With regal poise Alma faced the stares and gawking of bug-eyed natives who had heard the news. She'd do, she'd hold her own at the Square Deal.

"Case you want to do a bit of shopping," he remarked, as they got under way, "I can show you around, though there's little enough here like what you're accustomed to. Still and all, it takes hats to keep the gals happy, and that's one thing here that's not all cow town style."

"Oh? You do have a good milliner?"

"Show you tomorrow." Then, as they neared Cornelia's place: "Her lights are on now, she must be working late. No harm stopping and palavering a little."

Cornelia mockingly reproached Hobson for having stayed away. "Jim and I," she explained, "have always been twelve hours apart. He starts work when I quit. I'm awfully glad you gave him an excuse to come in." She gestured to a heap of boxes, some not yet unpacked. "New models. Wouldn't you like to try on a few?"

Alma drew back enough for Hobson to know she did not want to try on any hats. He covered up. "It's been a long day. Alma's just got here, and she's going to be busy learning the ins and outs of tending the tiger. Soon as she's settled down—"

"I'll set this one aside," Cornelia insisted. "It was built for you."

"Thank you, but—oh, do save it for me then. Good night!"

Once they were on their way, Alma said to Hobson, "You took me in there to mock her. You two were more than friends."

"She dumped me," Hobson said. "And if I'd kept you away, or even seemed like it, it'd looked as if I made too much of a point out of a newcomer. It'd made it seem as if right off the bat it was a lot more than just business between you and me."

They drove out of town and into the mesquite to watch a horse thief's moon rise from the buttes. Hobson looped the reins about the whipstock. Alma, without having made any perceptible move, was a lot closer to him. Her touch was soft, warm, exciting.

"Something about this—all this openness—it takes your breath away," she murmured.

Hobson studied the lovely hands. They were not quite as soft as he had expected. His sense of touch was honed down to a hair, so that he could tell a hand-marked card by feeling the ink welts on the back. These weren't a fancy lady's hands, and

he was glad, though he didn't know why.

"Where'd you leave your rings?"

"What rings?"

"The two you've been wearing. They marked your finger."

"You don't miss much, do you? Well, I flipped the gold band into Lake Ponchartrain, and pawned the diamond one. Dish washing," she added ruefully, "fairly ruined my hands."

"Was he a gambler?"

"He drank."

Hobson chuckled. "The Mexicans say a gambler is worse than a hundred drunkards. Then there's the fellow that tries to be both!"

And then, natural as moonrise, he was kissing Alma. For a moment she yielded and he learned that she was supple-waisted and well shaped as he'd suspected. There was promise in her eager mouth and in the flutter of long lashes. Then something snapped and she said calmly. "You'll get our minds quite too far off cards."

Yet he had torn aside one of her veils: she was kiss hungry and her voice wasn't quite steady when she asked him to drive on. And as he drove, it was natural to make plans for Alma.

HE WAS not amazed when, at her door on the second floor of the Miners & Drovers Inn, she invited him in. During her absence, she told him, the manager had had the room dressed up a bit. There was a threadbare sofa, a lot of cushions and even some pictures.

"I've been going on my nerve," she said. "I'm ready to collapse!" With a twist and toe wriggle, she shed her kid slippers. "Run down and get us a drink while I make myself comfortable."

"What'd you like? Don't figure you'd care for red liquor."

"Anything at all—use your imagination. Get your cards and things. You must explain monte to me, and the kind of faro boxes they use here."

She probably didn't know a tongue-tell from a screw box, but no matter; all the better, in fact, because she'd learn square dealing from the start, with no bad habits to kick up trouble later.

When he came back with champagne, brandy, a couple decks of cards, a box and a case, he nearly dropped his cargo. During his absence she'd shucked her tailored suit and put on a lacy negligee. He couldn't decide what he did and what he did not see; in fact, he couldn't decide much of anything except that he knew just about what it felt like to swallow a bucket of forty-rod whiskey.

He set the glassware on the bureau and then on the seat of a chair, and finally pulled a stand over handy. He spilled more wine on the floor than into the glasses. Then he began to believe his eyes, and with steadier touch laced each glass with brandy.

"That's rather tricky, isn't it?" Alma asked. "I don't want to get giddy."

"What do you think that robe's doing for me!" He ruffled a deck of cards, shuffled it, gave it a double cut. "You better put on something else if you expect me to keep my mind on faro!"

"If you don't like me this way you can turn the lamp down. This is all I have. I know it's ridiculous in a cowtown, but—"

"Better keep it on, then, you'd look plumb ridiculous without it!"

"Oh would I?"

"I meant, if you got absent-minded and stepped into the hall," he corrected hastily, and got the lamp wick down to a thin yellow thread of flame. "You'd look—"

"I know how I'd look," she mocked.

"You'd look like you'd stepped out of smoke and fog—"

"You don't have to show me!" she protested. *"Jim!"*

But the promise in the long greenish eyes was growing, glowing and for all his getting only a mouthful of chiffon or

a strand of hair, which now cascaded luxuriously down to her shoulders, Hobson was definitely forgetting Cornelia and living very much in the present.

When the door slammed open without warning he had an armful of redhead and various trimmings. This, however embarrassing, was what gave him a split second to get organized. The hostile looking man in the doorway waggled a pistol and yelled, "You dirty son, let go of my wife! Alma, you get away from that hound. I followed you! You didn't think—"

"Get out of here," she cried. "Sam, I'm free, I've got a right—"

Alma, however, did not get away, because Hobson had her squeezed tight with one arm; he let her kick and squirm. Someone clumped up the hall. Badger game, that was how Hobson sized it up. And another important thought: My smokepole's at the end of the lounge, it might as well be in China. All the while he stuttered and pretended to be a lot more scared than he was. Give Sam another moment to get rattled for lack of a target. He'd be waiting for the witness, whose every jump brought him nearer.

Hobson let go of Alma all at once. The sudden release sent her sprawling headlong from the lounge to land on her bed. At the same time Hobson had lurched sidewise, in the opposite direction. The two way move confused the husband, who blazed away with a wild shot. Hobson, who had scooped up his Peacemaker the first grab, cut loose. The full-throated roar of the Colt seemed a swelling out of the .41's whack. The heavy slug drilled Sam's belt buckle. A second shot knocked him into the hall. Hobson, smoking gun at his hip, bounded to the doorway. The men who had come running at the sound of the disturbance dug their heels in to check their haste.

"I don't need any help," he told them. "Tell Jubal Chase I got another customer for the coroner. And tell him if he wants to talk to me I'll be right here—and he better knock afore he comes in!"

He slammed the door and set the latch, though the jamb had warped so that the tongue did not engage well in the socket. That's what had made it easy for the intruder. He scooped Alma up from her bed and eased her to the lounge. She was white and trembling, too shocked to cry. Something was odd about the whole deal. If it had been a badger game, it had had trimmings which she had not expected. And the way she clung to him, now that it was over, won her the benefit of the doubt.

CHAPTER TWO

Poker Payoff

THE newly-made widow, outfitted in a low-cut black gown, kept the Square Deal jammed. The crowd came to look and stayed to play. The customers followed her from faro layout to keno goose, and when, after sufficient coaching, she took over the monte bank, monte became the game of the evening.

Meanwhile, Hobson kept busy with a select group of cattlemen, merchants and freighters who considered poker to be science and art. Winning or losing money was secondary.

There was Longhair Smith, and Little Smith: Hardrock Pike and Teacup John, and Jacknife Willis, who always laughed at the world. His poker face was so steadily in motion that it hid more than any blankness could have. And he said to Hobson, "Jim, these here games are cutthroat as real life, excepting for one thing."

"How's that, Jacknife?"

"It's this-away," Jacknife went on. "It's not dumbness that makes a lot of these jiggers flock to Nahash Butler's skinning house. My idear is, they go jest account every faro box is fuller of springs than an alarm clock, and every card marked.

Account when they do win, they get more in a jubilating mood than we get taking you for a cleaning, onct in a dog's age."

"When the female tiger tender turns a crooked deal a ten year old kid could spot, they feel important account they see it, but are jest too dang generous and sporting to embarrass a lady. And when they catch a man dealing off the bottom, they got suthin to brag about—their eye is quickern his paws."

"Sounds like Gospel," Hobson admitted thoughtfully. "But why don't you hustle over to Butler's?"

"Bucking your science is excruciating as hell. And a fellow can't expect to find everything in one pocket."

* * *

The following afternoon, as Alma was giving her hat and veil a final touch in front of her mirror, she said to Hobson, "I've a good notion not to go driving with you."

"Here I wait an hour for you to get dressed," he complained whimsically, "and quicker'n I could copper a bet you change your mind. What's wrong, want to sit here and grieve about that hat you took all afternoon yesterday to buy, not being what you really wanted, not a-tall?"

"Oh, no, I love the hat!" She whipped the veil, unpinned the headgear and planted herself on the arm of the sofa. "I'm just a little bored dealing faro, with a case-keeper doing most of the work for me. Now, in poker, you're on your own. It must be awfully exciting. Teach me how."

"Women can't savvy poker."

"But I'd draw a crowd, I know I would. And I *could* learn."

To humor her, he got a couple of decks of cards. "Watch me, I'll deal from the bottom. Did you get it?"

She had not.

He dealt four hands, face up, playing each in turn as though he did not know what the other hands contained. Then he scooped up the cards, shuffled, and asked, "See anything odd?"

"Why, no."

"Well, there was. Let's have another round."

He repeated the play.

"Oh, you're getting your hand from the bottom of the deck, it's all aces, so far."

The fifth was a king.

"Sure. I got all the aces to the bottom the first few hands."

Her eyes narrowed. "How—why—why all this, if you're a square dealer, how'd you ever learn such tricks, and why?"

"Unless I could do it better than a crook, any crook could take me."

He ended by finding her a deck of strippers, with the high cards shaved down by a hair breadth. He found her a marked deck. And as he taught her, point by point, he felt as though he walked on air. A woman who believed in him, instead of trying to herd him out of business, was something to take along. He figured they'd do nicely in Tombstone, where real money changed hands. . . .

SEVERAL days later Hobson got a note from Cornelia. She wanted him to see her at once. He stepped into the shop and said, "You were kind of sparing of words, but anything I can do for you, I'm glad to."

"Thanks, Jim, but I'm trying to do *you* a favor. Watch out for that lady of yours. She'll make you more trouble than you can swallow."

"She didn't horn in on you so I reckon you mean this on the level. I'll hear you out."

"When she came in to get a hat, I noticed she'd taken the label out of the one she was wearing. In other words, she's not from New Orleans and she didn't want me to notice where she'd bought her hat. And that business about her husband.

That set me thinking. Maybe he got excited and shot instead of just threatening you, and maybe it was a frameup and he wasn't her husband at all. But if he intended to kill you and he had done so, without giving you a chance, he'd have got away with it, even as an ex-husband or pretending to be one."

"Listen, honey, I did half way ask myself what was behind it all, but she was plumb shocked and surprised and scairt out of a week's growth by the gunning. It took her an hour to pull herself together, and there was lots she couldn't fake. And he had letters and stuff. There was one saying she didn't ever want to see him again and threatening to have the law on him if he bothered her," Hobson retorted. "I saw them myself, the sheriff asked me questions. And she showed him a divorce decree."

"Oh, all right, Jim! I know you're no ninny, walking around with your mouth wide open, but watch yourself."

"My partner heard of that gal from a friend of his. Maybe Nahash Butler did get wind of it and set her ex-husband on the job. But that's settled, and the first time I get Nahash alone with a gun in his hand, I'm getting a showdown. Anyway," he went on, "if Alma and I split up right now, I'd still be gambling. And you'd still be against it. So I'm standing pat."

"That girl will make you a snootful of trouble!" Caroline said slowly.

He regarded her perplexedly. "Well, thanks, anyway."

She laid a hand on his arm to detain him. "You're awfully fond of her? And not just getting even with me?"

"I'd go to hell for that woman."

"Maybe you will, Jim, but I hope you don't. . . .

HOBSON continued coaching Alma. Before long he could ask his partner to give her a whirl at it, and offer to make good if she fumbled too badly. He was about to make the proposition when Craig said, "Jim, you take over and run the shebang for a couple days. I've got to look at what's going on at that claim I'm grubstaking in Dos Palos."

Which suited Hobson. He'd give Alma her trial, and on Craig's return pass it off as a joke for which he was willing to pay—or else triumphantly announce that a sudden hunch had paid off.

He had little more than broken the news to Alma that night when in came Nahash Butler, accompanied by two friends who saw to it he didn't get into trouble.

"Jim," Butler said pleasantly, "I'm a peaceable person. I believe in the arbitration of cards to decide the distribution of wealth, not the gun fighting method which deprives a man, and for keeps, of the chance of amassing another roll and going forth again to win. Yet you haven't hesitated to tell everybody I've made two attempts to bushwhack you. Let's settle this the sporting way?"

"Let's hear it," Hobson said softly.

Butler continued, "Put up the cash value of your interest in the Square Deal. I'll put up a like amount. Table stakes. And the one who's cleaned—will leave town. I'll bring my best house man to side me, and you pick Amos Craig or anyone else you please."

There was a scraping of feet, a widespread muttering. The challenge had caught the fancy of everyone in the house—everyone, that is, excepting Hobson. Alma, leaving her layout in charge of the case-keeper, hurried over.

"Jim, it'll be exciting! I'm so thrilled! And with Amos out of town, let me play with my own money. If you win, I want to win with you. If you lose, I want to share that, and we'll leave together. I won't be in your way! The worst I can do is be frozen out first! Please, Jim!"

The Square Deal's customers crowded around. "Call him, Jim! This here's

competition for sure!' Tie into him and make him eat dirt!"

A man didn't have to fight, and he did not have to bet: but when he claimed to be a gun-slinger, he had to live up to it, and when he claimed to be a sporting man, he could not decline a challenge.

"You want to play here?" Hobson asked. "Only fair, Nahash. Last time we played at your place!"

Butler said readily, "That's what I meant. But to make it fair and to protect innocent bystanders, everybody's got to check his guns with the marshal. You whittled me out of a pot once, using a quick draw when you didn't like your cards."

"Okay, Nahash. Craig's out, and I can't make a close figure on what my share's worth. Can't cut too fine, but I'll tap the safe for a fair amount, enough to leave me finished if I lose."

They dickered around for a moment. Butler accepted Hobson's rough appraisal. "Table stakes," he repeated, and then, raising his hat, he bowed to Alma and said, "I'll be back in an hour or so, m'am, if you want to eat a bite and rest up a bit."

He stalked to the door.

Hobson said, "If he welshes on me, if he don't leave town like the bet calls for, his gunslicks won't do him any good. I'll have clear call to pick him off with a Winchester first time he pokes his nose out of doors!"

EXCEPT for two buckskin pokes of gold on the table, Hobson had his cash in stacks of twenties. Butler had all his stake at hand and in sight. His sidekick, Slim Daley, matched Alma's stake.

"Use house cards," Butler said, "I'm not worrying."

Each knew that the other could tell a doctored deck in the dark, and that the thing to watch was the players. The table was in the corner of the stairway which led to the second floor. This, and one wall and a barrier made of a row of chairs, kept "itemers" from getting close enough to a player's back to see his cards and signal them to his opponent.

As the gamesters felt one another with small bets, Hobson saw that Alma, though tense with excitement, was holding her own. The muttering of the spectators died for a moment, then rose again, drowning the whisper of cards and the clink of gold. The battle, they knew, would not begin until a big hand forced Alma and Slim Daley out.

It might end in a few hours; it might drag for a day or two, until sheer exhaustion upset judgment. Weariness made it harder to be slick in dealing off the bottom, but weariness also made it harder for the other to detect a crooked deal. Alma was Hobson's second, keeping an eye on Butler and his sidekick; Daley had a like part in the duel.

Presently, when Hobson began to rake in some good pots, Butler frowned, hitched about and ended by elbowing some discards to the floor. Though these were neither stained nor marred, he wanted a new deck, and he got it. Spectators picked up the cards. Whether or not that was what Butler had expected, that was what he had got, and he wasn't any too pleased looking when Hobson had said, "None of us pick anything off the floor, Nahash!"

Still and all, something had happened, and since there was no apparent reason for it, Hobson became unseasy: Butler's luck had of a sudden changed for the better, and Alma's significant glance did not help Hobson too much. He had a peculiar sensing that something was wrong, even though a long streak of hands too good to drop and not good enough to back to the limit was something which he usually faced without turning a hair.

He remembered how he had once told Cornelia, "I keep track of faro or any other game, the pips and the faces sort of stick in my memory when I see them in the run

of play. It's natural as walking and it's something I don't think on at all. If I did, it wouldn't work. Just like if I started thinking on how to move my feet to walk from here to the door, I'd get my feet all crossed and fall on my face. Whenever there's a showdown, I see it and it sticks, and I get a feeling about where those cards'll show up later. That's why I can play square. And that's why four-five in a game is better than two-three. I see more cards."

Cornelia had listened with wonder, and then she had said pointedly, "Then you *do* have an advantage over anyone in the poker game with your sixth sense—and is that square?"

All this came back to Hobson to trouble him, for while he was not being badly hurt, his instinct was not ticking. But finally he got his chance: three kings and a pair of aces. Daley and Alma dropped out. Hobson and Butler raised each other a thousand at a clip, until Hobson's two pokes of gold had not much stacked coin to keep them company.

He called—and found himself bucking four deuces. That hurt.

He got a few decent hands, and recouped a bit. This was the old game, old stuff, but something other than cardboard was fighting him. It was as though Cornelia's hatred of gambling had ambushed him, a cramping, stupefying force whose aim was to finish him.

Alma was doing nicely, calmly as though the outcome made no difference. She dealt with a professional touch. She raked in a small pot. And then it was Hobson's deal again.

BUTLER had openers, and drew one. Daley dropped out, so did Alma. This was Hobson's moment, the moment he had been fearing would never come. He was not even sorry he didn't have the money to back his hand as he should. The tide had turned. Fortune could not hate a man and give him a straight flush, ace high.

He saw Butler's bet and raised enough to get a nibble. The only bad break he now faced was that his enemy didn't have enough for a plunge. Butler however saw the raise and went him better, enough to be interesting, but not enough to alarm him. Butler, Hobson now sensed, must have cards too good to waste; he was throwing out bait, and Hobson obliged him.

He shoved out all the loose coin, and the final buckskin pouch.

"This is it, Nahash."

Butler hefted the sausage shaped poke, and pushed out three tall stacks. No use counting. Whichever way it went, the jig was just about up.

"I'm calling you," Butler said.

Daley hitched over for a peep at his boss' hand.

All necks craned. There was a cough, somewhere among the spectators, and in that silence the sound was startling. Hobson spread out his cards. "Straight flush, ace high. Good enough, Nahash?"

Butler showed his hand. "I'm taking this!" he called in a voice that carried like a cavalry trumpet. "With the four tens you gave me. Get your cheating paws off that pot!"

Four tens and a deuce: and Hobson had showed ace, king, queen, jack and ten. The shock of it numbed Hobson for a split second; but what prodded him to action was Butler's shout, "Next time you stack a deck, do a better job, tinhorn!"

As though at a signal, hangers-on from Butler's Eldorado made a concerted swoop, kicking from in front of them the barrier of chairs. Their line was somewhat less solid, yet they outnumbered, three to one, the others who had crowded up for a close look and their getting the jump on those others made it clear that they had been expecting a riot call. There were so many that they made up for the lack of hand

guns. Jim Hobson's housemen didn't have a chance.

Hobson snatched his own chair. "Get out!" he yelled, shouldering Alma off balance, "get out while you can!" As he spoke he swung at Butler, flooring him. He got in a second sweep, smashing the chair across the head and shoulders of the man who led the rush. He slashed and jabbed with the fragment remaining in his grip, until, from the side, the glancing blow of a blackjack knocked him to his knees. The wallop stunned but did not stop him. He lurched forward, tackling a man. The others poured over him and the one he brought down; for a moment he was protected by the hulk of the very man who had led the charge.

Hobson made the most of the respite, and with fresh strength gave a heave and a twist which got him in the clear. The table tipped, blocking the rush. Gold cascaded to the planks. Coins rolled among shifting feet. A man stooped to grab. Hobson, snatching one of his own pokes of gold, shot up from his crouch. He butted his nearest opponent on the chin, knocking him senseless, and then he set to work with his gold-loaded buckskin pouch. The compact knot of heavy metal made a deadly slugger. He cold-caulked one and gave another a knee.

Meanwhile, half a dozen battling clusters milled about, knocking over tables, tipping faro layouts. The housemen had their hands full. Alma, her gown in tatters, came out of the corner by clawing for the guard rail and pulling herself up and over to the stairs; but no one had any eye for the loveliest legs in Ojo Caliente. And for a moment, no one had an eye for Hobson; battered and bleeding, he was beyond recognition.

Several battlers, groggy and shoved from the scramble, blocked the approach to the stairs. Hobson let out an explosive yell which for sheer ferocity startled them. He leaped straight at them, knocked them sprawling before they could make way, attack or block. He whipped the buckskin pouch, cooling one who belatedly made for him, then he reached the stairs. Those left clawing the floor behind him blocked those others who, awakening to the escape of their proposed victims, rushed after him.

He raced down the hall and to the steps leading into the alley. Once in darkness he slacked up. He stumbled along, half blinded with blood and sweat. He was exhausted, and trembling until he figured he was about to shake himself apart. There was no pursuit. The shouting and the crashing was petering out. Maybe someone had got command with a sawed-off shotgun, a weapon from behind the bar, bringing it into play when at last it could be used without menacing friend and enemy alike. But whatever the case might have been, it made no difference to Hobson. He had been made out a cheat in the town where square dealing had been his boast, and he was through —and regardless of the bet he had made with Butler.

HE DRAGGED himself up the back stairs of the hotel. Once in his room, he dug out a spare Colt, checked it, and found it in order. Though his face was battered badly and one eye rapidly swelling shut, his hands were in good shape. He washed and got into fresh clothes. Then, after eyeing the thick-lipped face in the mirror, he adjusted his spring clip holster and snapped his gun into it. Let them keep the weapon he had checked. He didn't want to see anyone. No explanation, however reasonable, could explain away what people had seen.

He would not see Cornelia. But the thought of her made him say, bitterly. "She's wrong for once—this time, gambling was not gunning!"

A tap at the door startled him. He pounced to the jamb, twisted the key, and

though he had the wild hope that it was Cornelia, he snapped, "Come in and keep your hands in sight!"

It was Alma. Though he had expected his face to shock her, or anyone else, it was her face which jolted him. She wore not a scratch or bruise. She had not been touched. What knifed him was her expression of triumph, of gloating, of long pent up malice in her eyes, and in her voice when she said, "This is what I worked for, tinhorn! Or haven't you figured out who slipped that stacked deck into play? Jud Landry was my husband! Now do you understand?"

He holstered the gun. "You're something Nahash Butler dug up to use against me." He snatched her wrist; the hard grip made her wince behind her exultation. "Prove that to me, *that*, and rub it in then, and give the millinery gal the full right to smear over me. She hoorawed me and broke up with me account of Jud Landry. Make a big night of it—who knows you for what you are?"

"Nahash Butler."

He shrugged.

Alma eyed him, and now curiosity took the place of triumph. His bearing and voice made her vengeance lose its teeth. He had been hurt only by fists and boots. He took her for a hired swindler who had betrayed his confidence; it was so clear that he wrote off all those kisses as part of the deal and thus was not hurt a bit, since everything had been bought and paid for by Butler. And this piqued her into saying, "Take me out to Jud's place. That's the only way I can prove myself. And that's one thing no one could have dreamed you'd want—proof. So whatever's there, if anything is there, it'll show you."

"Not scared I'll wring your neck?"

"I risked that knocking at your door and telling you. If I am Jud Landry's widow, you would not lay a hand on me. And if I can't prove myself, if I am what you think I am, you'll still not hurt me—nothing counts for you but a shot at Butler."

"Throw in the tail with the hide," he said, with a cracked smile, a wry and painful smile. "Prove you're not a phony and maybe it would hurt, a little."

CHAPTER THREE

Cold Deck

THE MOON was rising when Hobson hitched at the rack in front of Landry's ranchhouse and handed Alma to the ground. They hadn't exchanged a word during the drive. Their way lighted by the lantern he had borrowed from the hostler at the livery stable, Hobson and Alma went into the house.

"Jud wrote he'd got only a bit of furniture. He was going to have me pick the rest."

"Got the letter?"

"I was afraid someone might run across it. But he said he'd bought a good kitchen stove, a Kalamazoo, with warming oven. Figured there mightn't be one in town when I arrived. Look at the dust on the floor. Nobody's been here since he left."

The dust had not been disturbed. There was not a print in it.

They looked into the kitchen. There was a homemade table, a chair, a bucket of ashes and the new range. A Kalamazoo, with a greasy skillet on it, and a coffee pot.

For the first time, he saw that fatal night's gambling with Jud Landry as Cornelia had seen it. He had the outrageous notion, just for an instant, that Nahash Butler had had nothing to do with this night's disaster, and that Cornelia and Alma had conspired to hit him between the eyes by showing him Landry's start at a home. He wanted to speak his newborn thought and say aloud, "Batching out here, digging a well, grubbing mesquite, cooking his own bait, no wonder

he got reckless and kicked up his heels." And it hurt now because he could not reveal his sudden understanding, and could not add the next thought, "Damn fool, maybe, but I've used those words for the last time."

He swallowed, as though to eat the words.

"And there ought to be an Axminster carpet in the bedroom, with a rose pattern," Alma went on, remorselessly. "Bed's new, walnut bureau's second hand."

At the bedroom door, Hobson noted the cobwebs that made a seal.

"Call it quits," he demanded, voice harsh. "I believe you."

She twisted the knob and stepped in. "He must have some letters of mine. Last one I wrote, I said school would close a week earlier than I'd expected. I'd been teaching." She fumbled in the bureau drawer, and got a handful of letters. "Look—"

"I take your word! That picture there, of him and you—"

"Look!" she cried, thrusting the pack into his hands.

She flung herself on the bed. Endurance had reached its limit. She buried her face in the pillows to cry it out of her system. Hobson stared at the envelopes until a streak of cussedness made him dip into one, and read a line or two. He laid the pack on the bureau. He seated himself beside Alma, and when the convulsive shudder of her shoulders finally eased, he touched her with a gentle hand.

"Hear me out, before we go back to town."

Alma dabbled her eyes. "I don't like this as much as I thought."

"What you don't like is how you played up to me and I believed in you. What you don't like is that I told Jud to go somewhere else and he got sore, and then I played. What you don't like is that I gave him a square deal, and you didn't give me one. But here is what you will like."

"What is that?"

"I am through gambling for keeps. Not on Jud's account, but account of how no matter if a fellow is square, he's bound to cold deck someone that isn't even sitting in the game. And thinking on me and Cornelia, it seems a fellow can even cold deck himself." He dipped into his pocket for the buckskin bag, dark now with his own dried blood. "Regardless of what Butler paid you to euchre me, I'm giving you this to pay off on your property here. This is not doing something for you, it is on my own account because I am getting shed of gambling, and gambling winnings."

"Not after what I did!" She recoiled from the poke as though from a rattler. "Not after the way you acted when I told you what I'd done. If it'll do any good, I'll clear you. I don't care what people'll think of me."

"Don't do anything. I'm through because I want to be."

"Do you suppose she would believe, if I told her?"

"After the way you and I cut up, no. But I'm not trading. You can stand on the courthouse steps and sing out all you want, and I am still through, because I am plumb fed up, and for keeps."

The shattering of glass made Alma cry out. Then, from outside the window, a man commanded, "Hoist 'em, Hobson! Or I'll blow your backbone through your gizzard."

THE MAN at the sill had scarcely spoken when from the front came three men on the run. They were masked. One, pistol drawn, was a stride ahead of the other two, who blocked the door.

The leader said to the one outside, "All right, Hank, come in."

The man to the right of the speaker edged past and into the room. He had a rawhide riata which he fingered as though

eager to get to work with it. The other stepped in, and then Hank, pistol now holstered, joined the group.

"We aim to clean up on all the tinhorn gamblers and card sharks in this man's town," the spokesman resumed. "When slickers start cold decking each other, an honest man ain't got a chance. And we're a-starting with you."

"I rung that stacked deck in to get even with him!" Alma cried. "It wasn't his fault, he didn't know, you can't—"

"Hush up, Alma!" Hobson cut in, but he had not been able to shout her down; and failing to realize that her protest in his favor would only put her in danger, she raised her voice and repeated her plea.

They were masked, Hobson suspected, because they had come to dispose of him, while sparing Alma. Only two of the four had spoken. The other two, he had to conclude, were men whose voices she would have recognized. Of the silent pair, one most surely was Butler. The man's size, and then, those bench made boots with the fancy stitching—not enough dust to hide that detail which made Hobson's suspicion good as certainty.

Alma's outburst had given the vigilance committee a setback. They had not reckoned on a woman who would tell the town that an innocent man had been strung up. But for this, all was clear, for a lynching, coming right after the battle at the Square Deal, would not be investigated.

"Look here, gents," Hobson said, "there's things you don't understand. Alma, hand me that poke of gold, yonder. If anyone claims I slickered him, any time at all, loan me enough to make good, and if we come to an understanding, I'll pay back. And if me and that man don't come to an understanding, then leastwise, they'll not rob a woman."

He prayed that they would not see through his pretense of stupidity; he was acting as though he accepted them for what they claimed to be: townsmen fed up with card sharks. He acted and spoke as though he didn't suspect that their yarn was to influence Alma in whatsoever she might be telling later.

"Sit down honey," Hobson said, as with steady fingers he untied the drawstring of the pouch. "Shucks, they wouldn't string a woman to a cottonwood tree, not a woman stacked up like you. Now, there's quite a piece of money here—Enough for any one, maybe any two that feel I slickered them."

He poured coin into the palm of his left hand. He held the pouch high, and near the lapel of his coat, letting the pieces drop, a few at a time, to build up a gleaming mound.

"We can settle our differences, and I'll light a shuck. I'll shake the dust of this town off my hocks, and for keeps—"

And then he got the sure sensing that this was his moment. The falling gold pieces, the patter—he'd snared them. His left hand flipped up, hurling the coin like wind driven rain; his right went for the spring clip holster, and his gun came out blazing. In principle, it had been exactly like bottom dealing, or switching decks right before a sucker's wide open eyes—

THE MAN who had been covering Hobson dropped without pulling the trigger. The remaining three, bunched up, clawed for leather. Hobson, shooting through the smoke of his own gun, hoped he'd last long enough to get that one big man.

From behind the thundering tangle came a scream that promised to lift the shingles. A barefooted woman dashed the contents of a bucket, and in the way a housewife sloshes out a pail of suds. A white cloud swallowed the men as they returned Hobson's fire. The big man dropped, kicking and slashing out with his arms. The others fled. Coughing and blinded, they stumbled down the front

steps. They made for the horses they had left somewhere well away from the house. Hobson, holding his breath, plunged through the cloud of ash which had blinded his assailants. He stood fast on the porch, set his Colt across the crook of his left arm, and got in one good shot. A man running in the moonlight staggered, went down, got up again. And then both were too far away to be winged.

When Hobson turned back into the house, the barefooted woman flung the empty bucket into a corner and caught him with both arms. It was Cornelia. "Are you hurt—did they—oh, I was scared sick and silly," she sobbed, as she struggled to regain control of herself. "I heard the riot at the Square Deal, I was working late. I heard you'd been badly hurt, so I went up the backstairs to your room to see you. You were busy with Alma, talking about coming out here, and I backed away in a hurry and—"

She regarded Alma levelly. "And got here ahead of you to see how your remorse for your dirty trick was going to turn out. Oh, yes, I grabbed the first horse from the hitching rack!"

"You know, now," Alma said, wearily. "Do you blame me, too much?"

Cornelia had no answer for that one. "Well," she said, "when those four men sneaked up, I didn't dare move from where I was listening, but I finally got my shoes off and made it to the kitchen."

When Cornelia finally let go of him, Hobson said, "Wait till I see what's behind the masks."

He came back with two bandannas pierced with eye-holes, and an unfired sixgun. There was new strain in his face. He sat down, and licked his lips. After a moment of silence, Cornelia demanded, "What's wrong—who—Jim, what's wrong?"

"I got Butler," he answered, when he could speak. "The other—the other—my partner—Amos Craig—he didn't go to Dos Palos." Hobson got up, drew a long breath. "My guess is he figured that square dealing didn't pay enough, and breaking up with me would tell the town he was through with square dealing. And helping Butler show me up would give them both a rep at my expense." He faced Alma. "I see it all, now. Butler got in touch with you, to use your grudge and grief, and Craig made it easy with his notion to have a lady gambler. I just now took a couple pokes of coin from Butler's pockets, probably what he and Craig divided up after the fight. I bet Butler didn't pay off your husband's notes for you?"

"He'd hardly pay in advance!"

"Well, I left that money on the bureau. You earned it from him, and you earned it from me. You did me a favor, in a way you wouldn't and I wouldn't until these last hellacious minutes figure was very good, but it was. Anyway, let's get back to town."

Alma asked Cornelia, "You rode out? Leave that horse for me, you go back with Jim. Or I'll wait here till you send the sheriff out—but go, it's all over, it's all done, I don't mind the two lying in there, they won't bother me and Jud."

She turned her back on them. Hobson nudged Cornelia toward the front. "That gal," he said, as he stepped into the buggy beside her, "is as fed up with getting even as I am with gambling."

As he picked up the reins, Cornelia caught his hand. "You fed up with me?"

Her voice made him brighten, but he could not believe what he hoped. "Uh—um—after how I cut up with that redhead—well—what can I say to you?"

"Oh, you skillet head! I told you I came to see how far that reconciliation was going to go, the odds were five to one she'd turn to you as strong as she'd been against you. And what I heard was the best ever I could imagine!"

(Please turn to page 129)

UP THE TRAIL

WELL, like the poet said, "A woman's only a woman, but a good seegar's two-bits," or words to that effect. Right here and now, we'd like to give that fine thought a bit of a going-over, if you'll bear with us a few moments.

The frontier, as everyone knows, was primarily a man's country. To be sure there were a few exceptions; the rancher who moved out with his wife and family; the school-teachers who came after some progress at settlement had been achieved, and, in the roaring towns, the honkytonk charmers. But, by and large, it was a man's land, a rough land, a land where force and courage and fighting guts paid off.

And, also, by and large, it was a woman-hungry country.

The courtesy, sometimes exaggerated, sometimes highly romanticized, with which women of all types were treated when the trails were first blazed into the wilderness, shows that adequately.

It might have been according to the old supply-and-demand law, but our bet is that most of the men, whether trappers, miners, cowpunchers, or the kind who never let themselves get skylighted, would gladly trade all the cigars in Havana for a few minutes with a good-looking girl.

Some months ago, in answer to many letters, we started running stories that featured the frontier girls. "But tell us about *human* girls," one reader insisted. "We're tired of reading about these pink-and-white confections that go into swoons if a guy speaks above a whisper." "Lay off the mushy types, too," another letter read. "How's about some of the gals who packed, along with their good looks, plenty of moxie. Maybe someone like Belle Star or the Rose of the Cimmaron."

That's what we've been giving you, compadres. It took time to explain to the best writers of Western fiction, just exactly the kind of girl you were talking about. But we think we're on the right track.

Watch for the next issue, published July 20th for more of these stories, both long and short, that will take you back to the time when the West was untamed, and sometimes—nor do we think it a bad thing—the gals tended likewise.

See you in next issue. *Hasta la Vista!*

—Trail Boss.

A Tale of the Baron of Tres Alamos

By Harry F. Olmsted

Then he saw them, those four things depending from the lower foliage.

The Baron of Tres Alamos found the Ganadero murder legion so damned tough that, for the first time in his famed career, he figured it best to stay put in the killer combine's cold stony—and hang!

Hoss Greer's Ganadero Death Watch

CHAPTER ONE

Death's Welcome

FROM the day Hoss Greer impinged upon the changing Arizona scene he bore the reputation of rejecting cooperation, of playing lone wolf. The only basis for this was jealousy of Hoss' social choosiness. Mostly, it was unfair to one always wolf-wary, always uncanny at ferreting out enemy strategy before it destroyed him.

The record proves this. Hoss' narrowest escapes and most sanguinary gun episodes stemmed from his instant response to some community call or other. Take the time he was summoned to join in the fight against Northern Arizona and Pacific's new and ruinous shipping rates.

The call came from Ganadero Valley, where Hoss owned A 2 Z, a spread he hadn't seen since placing Pete Ricard there as ramrod, three years ago. Not even when El Toro, valley metropolis, strung bunting and celebrated the coming of the rails. Hoss had hated missing that but he was laid up with a broken leg at

Ruffner piled onto Poody, choking him into unconsciousness.

the time. He just couldn't make it there.

When the call came from Bangor Gannett, Secretary of the Ganadero Development Company, to join in their deliberations, he responded at once, angered that the railroad, symbol of progress, should be nice till it got its free rights-of-way, then gouge and antagonize the very people upon whom its welfare rested. Hoss wrestled with this short-sighted stupidity for three days, riding from Tres Alamos. Then, riding off Cedar Benches, he had the sweeping Ganadero before him, soft and rosy and lovely in the after-glow. El Toro yonder, tucked into a far indentation of the creekline. Mountains all around. Grass billowing.

At the junction where a road cut north toward the A 2 Z, Hoss paused, debating. First, he wanted talk with Pete, but wouldn't Pete be in town to attend the meeting? He thought of Pete's shyness, taciturnity, his direct way of cutting through sham, and decided Pete wouldn't attend. He turned his pony north.

TWILIGHT faded behind the jagged Senator Mountains. Dusk gloomed the Ganadero. Darkness caught Hoss a mile from the ranch, puzzling that he hadn't seen one A 2 Z critter. When he rounded the point and looked across at the ranch buildings, not a light showed. The boys *had* gone to town. Annoyed at his earlier decision, Hoss fought down an inclination to rein about, loped through the arched gate and into the dooryard.

Dismounting, Hoss stood beside his horse, keening the night, hand on his gun. That smell! Carrion! A down-valley wind spun the windmill, splashing water into a full trough, filling the night with the wail of dry axles for grease. The corral gate gaped open. The house door banged in the wind.

Edging upwind, Hoss came to the corner of the house and what he deemed to be the source of that fetid smell—a maggot-riddled dog. The beast had been dead a week, maybe . . . Pretty foul for one small dog, he thought, and took one step into the wind to free his nostrils of the reek. It did not. Cold warnings pouring along his spine, Hoss kept on along the house wall to the rear corner. And then he saw them, those four shadowy things depending from the lower foliage of the big boxelder. Things that swayed a little in the breeze.

The light was bad and Hoss could see little. But even before he took the bit in his teeth and approached the grisly site, he knew those hanged men were Pete Ricard and three of his boys. Pete was a fighting man and no believer in hiring Gentle Annies. To Hoss, that meant enemies had trapped the A 2 Z crew, taking them unawares. Enemies Pete knew as friends worthy of welcome.

Hoss halted beneath the tree, shaken, nauseated. He lit a match, verified his snap judgment and backed away, gasping for air untainted with death. He thought of looking about for a shovel, cutting down the bodies and burying them. But that would run into a lot of work and more time than he had to spare. Now, more than ever, he wanted to attend that meeting at El Toro. Pete and his boys had hung there undiscovered for several days. A few more hours would make little or no difference to them or to the man who had to bury them. Even so, Hoss observed a whimsical sentimentality unsuspected by the great majority of men who thought they knew him. He whipped off his hat.

"Pete an boys," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "I don't know who done this to you, or how, or why. But that I aim to find out, if it takes me ten years. You may have asked for this, boys, by dabblin' in some sorta shady business. Which same, knowin' Pete, I doubt. If not, I'll find the guilty coyote an' put a hum in his neck. . . ."

"An' I," said someone behind him, "will back you, right down through hell's hot hinged doors!"

HOSS spun, snapping his hand to his gun. Though his eyes were accustomed now to the gloom, he could see nothing. He stood there under the stars, puzzled, dangerous, his grim, gray eyes shuttling from one covert to another. "Who's that?" he gruffed.

A chuckle, cold and mirthless, answered him. And out of the boxed-in well housing clambered a grizzled, cadaverous man in frayed levis, floppy hat and run-over boots. Lugubrious, down-curving mustaches parenthesized his wide mouth. Leathery and wrinkled as a mummy, his eyes glowed with strange luminance beneath amazingly heavy brows. Fleshless, claw-like hands fluttered over a pair of tied-down guns.

"No call for gunplay, mister." The voice was dry, toneless. "Standin' on the ladder in this well, I could uh plugged you easy. Would have iff'n I'd figgered you was the killer come back to view his work. Could it be you're Hoss Greer?"

"I'm Greer, yes. But—"

"I 'lowed you must be, after hearin' your promise to gents too dead to care. I told Pete them skunks would tally him some day, but there sure was one the most stubborn an' confident men in Arizony. A even break was all he asked with his gun, an' he plumb expected his luck to be that good. It wasn't. I'd figgered his string was about played out, so I rode here to side him. I was too late."

"Who are you?" Hoss asked. "An' howcome A 2 Z trouble was open reading to you? While you're talkin', mister, what is this said trouble you told Pete would swaller him up?"

"Me?" The stringy veteran sat on the well housing, munching tobacco he'd shredded in his palm. "Seein' Pete's dead an' can't be hurt none, it won't do no harm to tell you I'm his Uncle Anse, on his ma's side. Name uh Anse Constable!"

"Constable!" Hoss stooped to look closer at the little man. "Anse Constable?"

"The same. Wanted from Santy Fe to Californy an' from Mexico to Canady fer every crime from chicken-thievin' to murder. Seven men have bin kilt an' presented to the law fer the bounty on my head. If I done half what the record claims I done, at the rate of a job a day, I'd be as old as Methusaler, which I ain't fer short of when the miseries take holt of my shot-up carcass. Hear tell you're hell fer law an' order an' a middlin' pistol shot, Greer. Mebby you'd like to collect the bounty on my hide."

The old fellow was talking Hoss right out of the nerve tension caused by the four hanging cadavers. He grinned wryly, stuck out his hand. "To hear you tell it, Anse, the sheriffs are runnin' their legs down to stubs hunting you. But that ain't the way I hear it, from Sheriff Newt Carrol, of Phoenix—"

"Newt?" Old Anse chuckled. "Plays a good hand uh poker, him. What's he tell you about me?"

"Says he got it straight from Bucky O'Neill that it was you who shot those cowboys loose from the Tewksberry trap, up yonder in Pleasant Valley. I happen to know it was you who brought out Missus Haverill an' her boy, after her man had died in twenty feet of snow, at the Red Valley Trading Post. You talk bad, Anse, but you ain't fooling men like Bucky O'Neill, Burt Mossman, Tom Rynning an' Frank Wheeler. Ain't a lawman in Arizona that wouldn't rather have you sidin' him than a *posse comitatus.*"

"Hogwash, I ain't no such a thing." Anse growled it, but his wide lips were twisted in a grin and his pale eyes were dancing. "You 'lowed you'd hunt down Pete's killer if'n it taken ten year. When do you start?"

Hoss started. "Cripes! What am I

standing here for, running off at the head? I'm due at a meeting in El Toro."

"I'll ride along with yuh," said Anse, trying to be casual. "Havin' nothin' better to do till tomorrow."

"Sure, Anse. Come along. I'm in the dark regardin' the trouble, but it's something the cowmen here are nursin' against the railroad. Railroads hire some mighty hard hands at times. Mebby we can learn something that'll tie Pete an' his boys to the augerment."

"Mebbyso." Old Anse hobbled away to get his horse. "But excuse me if I go lookin' fer somebody with a hide a lot less bullet proof than a damned railroad."

HOSS and Anse came swinging down to Chuckwagon Creek, stirrup to stirrup, their ponies holding a mile-eating trail lope. Where the skeleton girders of the new county bridge showed in the break that had once defined the old cattle ford, Anse suddenly reined to a stop.

Hoss brought his pony around. "What's the matter, fella?"

"This," muttered the old time outlaw, "is as fur as I go. They call me a human coyote. Gotta live up to the name, don't I? I'll sniff around a batch an' see kin I come up with some wolf sign."

"I'll be headed back to the A 2 Z directly, Anse. How'll I get in touch with you again?"

"God knows!" Anse shrugged. "It's a wise man who knows, when he parts from a friend, if'n he'll ever see him alive again. Me, I ain't much on the mingle, Greer, but I'll keep track of you an' mebbyso meet yuh out at the ranch to sorta straighten up the nasty mess yonder." He gigged his pony, dipped down the bank and vanished. Even his mount seemed to move on the wings of silence.

Hoss, a logical man and normally intolerant of those who molded themselves to some freakish pattern, snorted, sighed and stirred his animal across the bridge. Echoes of his pony's hoofbeats on the plank floor announced his coming to the town nestling on the south bank.

When Hoss rode into El Toro, the wide main drag was deserted. And when he rode into the stable and called for the hostler, he thought it, too, was unattended. But a man came stepping across the street and into the barn, a big man who turned up the lantern wick and gave him a prolonged scrutiny from dark eyes lost under shaggy brows. "That was you knockin' across the bridge, eh? Come in from the north, didn't yuh? From Winslow, mebby? Holbrook?"

Hoss looked at him in mock admiration. The fellow was big, barrel-chested, his small eyes bloodshot and his cheeks whiskey-veined. The eyes wavered under Hoss' direct gaze, turned hot at the faint scorn in his voice. "You're plain hell at readin' brands, ain't you, neighbor?" Hoss handed him the rein. "As a matter of fact, I come from Phoenix. My name's Hoss Greer. I own the A 2 Z an' I'm here to sit in on that meetin' of protest against the railroad. I'll take it kindly if you'll direct me to where the cowfolks is meetin'."

The big barn man grinned, stuck out a ham-like hand. "That," he said with relish, "is how I like to have a stranger come through. It saves suspicion an' misunderstandin' on a range where they's bad trouble. That's us. Glad you're here, Greer. If you'll stand yore hand, I'll put yore pony on the grain an' take you to the meetin'. I just come from there. I'm Jaxon Zane." He shook hands with exaggerated feeling.

He led Hoss' ridgerunner away, returning presently with a wicker demijohn. "A drink's what the doctor ordered after a long ride, Greer," he said, uncorking the jug and handing it over. "Moonshine, but prime likker. Nothin' like the slop they're servin' acrost certain bars I could name."

"Don't mind if I do." Hoss took a healthy pull, smacked his lips and took another. Zane hadn't lied. It was good whiskey. He handed it back and the barman wiped the neck on his sleeve, hung it on his little finger and let the whiskey gurgle down. "Ah-h-h-h, mighty smooth. That'll thaw out yore gizzard, Greer. Now let's get over to the meeting before Bangor Gannett excites them boys to tear up rails from here to the Rim. I'm for a middle of the ground course myself. How about you?"

"It has its points," murmured Hoss noncommittally, and hippered along beside Zane, unable to match the man's long strides across the street. Hoss had expected his guide to show him to the town hall. Instead, the way led direct to the Saddlehorn Saloon, one of the lesser of such places in El Toro. A gloomy, jail-like structure of quarried rock laid in mortar, with high barred windows and a solid door that hid what went on in the barroom.

A qualm of warning hit Hoss just outside that door. He paused and Jaxon Zane grinned at him. "What's the matter? Gettin' cold feet? Pshaw, you'll like these Ganadero cowmen. Salt of the earth they are but mighty apt to drink a man down. Come on."

Hoss had a downbearing sense of danger, confusing because he had nothing on which to hang it. So he went into the smoky barroom, where close to twenty men ranged along the bar. The clamor of conviviality ceased as the door closed behind Hoss. Men turned to stare. In the hush, Zane shouted, "Hoss Greer, men! A 2 Z."

THEY let out a yell and came crowding him, all reaching for his hand, expressing pleasure that he had decided to join them. And Zane introduced Bangor Gannett, a tall, handsome-featured man with Zane's furtive eyes and transitory smile. Fact is, the two men looked enough alike to be brothers. Gannett said, "Down a trail drink, Greer, and we'll go over the problem again. Meetin's turned into a mess, no two of us seeing eye to eye. We'll be interested in your judgment. Now shake hands with the boys. . . ."

One by one, he made Hoss acquainted with Adam Hayhurst of the Hayhook, Pitch Longmire of the Twin L, Wardell Steen, Auger; Garlock Ruffner, GR Connected; Elon Callow, Lazy C. Others. They were a hard looking lot, gun-hung like they were headed for war, ugly-visaged. Hoss couldn't remember ever attending a meeting where there were so many ugly men. Regular plug-uglies. They dragged him to the bar, banked around him as he poured his drink, staring at him, seemingly imbued with repressed eagerness and excitement. Prattling. Showing little of the taciturnity characteristic of cowfolks.

Again Hoss had that sense of danger. Something didn't smell right here. Every sense alerted, he drank and poured again. If he waited, standing his hand, they'd come out with it. Beside him, Pitch Longmire sighed audibly, drew a long breath. The others fell silent, waiting for him to speak. He laid a friendly hand on Hoss' shoulder.

"Then if I understand you, Greer," he said loudly, "you're for tearing up a mile of track and daring those highbinders to try to get trains through till they see things our way."

Hoss was less astonished than amazed at their gall. So that's why they invited him here? As a hook to hang their dirty levis on. All at once, Hoss saw it, thought he did. For some reason still a puzzle to him, Ganadero cowmen had decided on him as a goat, to shoulder the onus of whatever lawless steps were taken by the so-called Development Association. In other words, without his knowledge and consent, they had made him their leader,

the director of their warfare against the N. A. & P. Pete had resisted their pressure, defied them and had perished before he could get word to his employer. And all his men with him. Slow rage burned in Hoss.

"So that's what you understand, eh, Longmire? Well, all I can say is that your understander's loco as hell. I never made no such fool suggestion, never would . . ."

"You did so!" Down the bar a piece stout Adam Hayhurst turned accusing eyes on Hoss. "I heard you. What's the idea, Greer? Sayin' something one minute an' denyin' it the next." He circled the rest and came to Hoss, his straw-colored hair awry, his eyes slitted, his bulldog jaw jutting combatively. He wore a glove on his left hand and a tied down gun at his right thigh. He towered over Hoss. "Come on, damn it! Say yore piece an' let's get just where you do stand."

"Now, Ad!" Secretary Bangor Gannett's tone was placating. "Back up. We've got enough trouble without stirring it up amongst ourselves."

"Just a minute, Bang. I want to flush this lyin' son into the open!"

He stood swaying above Hoss, his lips parted. Every line of him screamed a challenge to Hoss, who would walk miles in tight boots to avoid a challenge but who had never backed down from one. He reacted now in the manner forever under attack by his critics. He sloshed whiskey, glass and all, into the face of the big cowman, drove a full-swung right to the jaw and followed in, pumping rights and lefts to Hayhurst's face, forcing him back until he was halted by a card table, across which he fell, blinded, stunned.

Standing spraddle-legged, Hoss waited for his man to right himself and come back for more, a pose that pointed up two facets of his nature. First, he never trusted a foe until he was dead. Second, he trusted other men fully until they made an unfriendly pass at him. In this case, the first trait saved his life. For Hayhurst, lying back across that card table, jerked his gun. The second trait nullified the first. As Hoss matched the man's draw, roaring at him not to be a damned jackass fool, he was jumped from behind, crushed to the floor.

Hoss made a respectable fight of it, though at no time did he have a chance. He got his arms free a time or two and smashed back straining, hate-contorted faces. He tore his legs free from clinging foes and spurred and bootheeled and battered them. But they were too many. They kept taking toll of him and when he weakened, they chopped at his skull with swinging gun barrels. Hoss went out like a snuffed candle, with Jaxon Zane holding him down and his physical counterpart, Bangor Gannett, pistol whipping him.

CHAPTER TWO

Hoss in Comealongs

HOSS was wakened by a fiendishly pounding headache, by a tormenting and ever-increasing singing in his ears and a blinding noonday glare in his eyes. Every muscle of his body shrieked with pain, every bone, every sinew. He forced a reluctant hand to his head, found his hair sticky with blood that had run onto his face and dried there. He tried to move and caught his breath as agony ran through him. They had kicked him in the back and belly and ribs after knocking him out. Nice people.

His mouth was parched with fever and he craved water. Mosquitoes hummed around his ears—or were they mosquitoes? That singing was in the ear that was down. His head lay on something hard, devilishly hard. He felt with his hands. "Cripes!" He gasped, and wrenched his eyes open. He shut them

again quickly. That blinding light. . . .

A deafening shriek tore through the night. The rasping squeal of brakes thrown on suddenly. Showers of sparks pouring from iron drivers and wheels. Hoss lay across the tracks of the N. A. & P. That blinding glare was the engine headlight!

Only a moment before Hoss had believed himself too near dead to move. Now, figuratively, he lifted himself by the slack in his levis, looped over the rail and lit rolling. With a mighty *whoosh* and a clanging, banging beat of drivers, the engine hurtled past, clipping Hoss ever so slightly and sending him spinning along the ties for a rod or two.

Too groggy to do otherwise, Hoss lay where he came to rest. The cars flashed past, wheels locked and sliding. The train slowed, ground to a shuddering stop. Brakemen came running, swinging lanterns. One cried, "Here's one!" He shone the lantern in Hoss' face. "You hurt, fella? Lord, I'll say you are. What happened?"

Before Hoss could organize his abused wits to answer, the second man yelled, "Holy smoke! Here's two more. This 'un's deader'n a mackerel. An' this 'un . . . .yep, he's dead too. Was they in a wagon, or—"

The engineer and fireman came hurrying back, seeming to waddle in their roomy bib overalls. "Is he dead?" the highballer asked. "Did I hit him?"

"Here's two you killed," cried one brakeman. "Gordy's got one there that seems to be alive."

"Three?" The engineer came to a halt, scratching his head. "I never saw but the one. He lay across the tracks. I was close before I saw him. Cowcatcher must have boosted him across the rail. Thank God for that. But the other two . . . where were they?"

Passengers were getting off, gathering around, talking excitedly. The train crew searched the ground and found excitement of their own. Three revolvers, one with two shots spent, two with three. Examination showed Hoss had a gunshot wound in the side. The two dead men, contrary to popular belief up to that moment, had both been shot center.

It was puzzling to the passengers. The engineer nervously urged haste. The train crew argued. Should they take the victims to El Toro or leave them for the sheriff? While talk went on, an El Toro posse roared up, led by Sheriff Gridley.

Pike Gridley, flashy, quick, theatrical, took command. The dead men, he said, were railroad detectives who'd interrupted a masked gang about to rip up track. When discovered, the malefactors had opened fire. One of three detectives escaped by speeder, bringing the word to El Toro. "This leader," Gridley pointed to Hoss, "was shot by the dick that escaped. I'll take him on the train. My boys will cut for sign and then fetch in the bodies. Gimme a hand, some of you boys."

They got Hoss into the train. The crew gave Gridley the guns found at the scene. The engine whistled. The cars jarred, jerked ahead. The train rolled, gathering speed toward El Toro. Grinning at curious passengers, Gridley handcuffed a wounded prisoner who'd been beaten half to death, clipped a cigar and defied the prohibition by lighting his weed and puffing contentedly.

Miles sped past, Hoss restless, grinding his teeth against pain. He was sick, weary, nervous, his mind wool gathering. Out of a strange waking dream emerged a funny, square little face with curled lips and dancing eyes. The ears were large, the nose small and grotesquely pugged. A laughing little man whom Hoss had a sense of knowing, not well but favorably.

"H'are yuh, Pike. This the desperator shot while feudin' the railroad?"

Gridley roused from a half doze. "Oh, hello, Ruffner! Yeah, this gent shot two

railroad bulls. Looks like El Toro'll be issuin' hanging invites, eh?"

RUFFNER! The name roused Hoss from his stupor. The cowman was regarding him with comical puzzlement. "Might get some bets, Pike, if the odds are right. Railroad dicks are brutal. Look how they marked this 'un before he shot 'em."

"Hogwash. Engine hit him. He ain't hurt bad. Anyhow, them dicks surely wasn't manhandlin' this jigger's whole hellacious gang. You reckon?"

Ruffner grunted. "Skinned knuckles . . . . humph. No cowcatcher puffed his face thataway. It'll be a trial I wouldn't miss, Pike. Something familiar about this man. If his face looked human, I might mebby recall him. What's your name, feller?"

Hoss eyed him owlishly, trying to grin. "Which Ruffner?"

"Garlock. GR Connected. Should I know you? Ever see me?"

"Sure. Met you at the last Stampede of the Bronc Stompers, in Phoenix. In fact, I was beatin' hell out of you last night when your mates ganged me."

"See, Gar?" scoffed Gridley. "He's crazy as a coot."

"Wait!" Ruffner gazed steadily at Hoss. "Fighting me? What mates?"

"Ganadero Development Association."

"Never heard of it. Where did all his happen?"

"Saddlehorn Saloon, in El Toro."

"A scummy dump, specializin' in knockout drops, Injun likker an'—"

"Aw, Gar," Gridley protested. "I wouldn't say that."

"If you did," Ruffner sneered, "you'd offend the crowd that elected you, Pike. It's time you quit sugar-coatin' Ganadero ills if you want in again." He eyed Hoss. "So, feller, my mates sawed your horns. Remember any of 'em?"

It wearied Hoss, but Ruffner was friendly and he, Hoss, would need a friend. He gritted his teeth. "You've shrunk since last night, Ruffner. I can't vouch for the rest any more'n I can for the big slob posin' as Garlock Ruffner. But I met a Bangor Gannett, Adam Hayhurst, Pitch Longmire, a man name uh Steen—"

"Howcome you to meet these men?"

"I was invited to a meeting of the association. Tolled there, sorta. Jaxon Zane introduced them other gents."

"He's loony, Gar," Gridley rapped. "Don't listen to such blackguardy."

Anger clouded Ruffner's pale eyes. "Why shouldn't I listen, Pike. I've lost beef an' I've been shot at three times in six months. The price of livin' in Ganadero is good gunmen. Jaxon Zane, eh?" He pulled his jaw. "I'll grab that no-good an' squeeze some truth out of him."

"Try that," the lawman gritted, "an' I'll jail you, Gar. Don't turn against your friends."

Ruffner ignored that. "Gannett," he murmured. "Owns the BAG, head of the valley neck. Zane's cousin an' just as crooked. Gannett's eyes didn't behave when he begged off goin' to Denver. Development Association, humph. Developing stock stealing, I betcha, an' shootin' cowmen from the brush. Something smells bad, Pike. Bad enough for you to quit playin' politics an' start sheriffin'." He brought his interest back to Hoss. "No, my friend, that outfit gold-bricked you. I've been to the District Cattlemen's Association convention, in Denver. Left Ad Hayhurst there, Pitch Longmire an' Ward Steen. Think you could identify the gents who posed as us in the Saddlehorn?"

"I couldn't miss."

"Good. I'll give you the chance."

"You will like hell!" snapped the lawman, his temper frayed. "This is my prisoner, Gar, an' I'm holdin' him incommunicado. No bail, no shysters, no lyin'

others into troubles unconnected with these murders. Get that straight."

Ruffner drew himself up to his five feet two, staring at Gridley. "We'll see, Sheriff. We'll mebbyso make that a campaign issue. Your prisoner was going to tell me his name, but didn't. What do they call you, feller?"

"They call me a lot of ugly names," Hoss grinned, "but they're nearest right when they say Greer!"

"Greer?" Ruffner recoiled. "Greer? Not—"

"Yup. Tres Alamos, an' all points west, north, east an' south. Hoss Greer!"

Gridley was growling, "He's lyin' through his teeth." But Ruffner was laughing, holding his sides, rocking from his heels to toes.

"Now what have you did, Pike? Ho, ho, ho. Only arrested the biggest cowman in Arizona. Vice-president of the cattle Association an' same for the Bronc Stompers. Side pardner of Governor Libby an' client of the best damned lawyers in Arizona. Wow! Will yore face get red when you gotta explain how you played into the hands of the hooligans knowed as the Ganadero Development Association." He turned along the car aisle, convulsed with mirth. "What a story to tell the voters when the campaign starts. I—I'll see you later, Greer."

He passed out of the car, still laughing. Something nasty about that laugh, a vague threat that brought a ray of hope to Hoss and seething anger to Gridley. "Damned nosey old goat," rumbled the law. "He's due to learn the hard way that pokin' his beak into my business pays off in misery. Imagine him claimin' you're Hoss Greer, of Tres Alamos."

"Imagine," echoed Hoss cynically. "Settin' here lickin' my hurts, I'm wonderin' what your game is, Gridley. I think you know I'm Greer. Surely them that beat me up an' laid me on the tracks out yonder knew it. They invited me by letter to El Toro. An' if you ain't workin' in with them buzzards, you're givin' an imitation that'll do till the real thing comes along. What's afoot, Sheriff?"

The lawman turned angry eyes upon Hoss, dropping his voice to little more than a whisper. "When I get you safely behind bars, feller, I'll explain why I hope to get you hung for the murder of two railroad bulls. An' you can explain to me what you hoped to gain by tearin' up N. A. & P. tracks."

AT least, the El Toro jailhouse was dark and quiet and unoccupied save for Hoss. He made the most of it, removing pants and boots and shirt and composing his aching body on the cot which, hard though it was, felt luxurious. Sleep eluded him. His whole body throbbed and his brain raced. Thirst deviled him. When the sheriff had locked him up, he had promised to return at once, with water and a medico. He didn't come. Hoss doubted he would.

He thought back to the beginning, his meeting with Jaxon Zane, wondering what dark game the so-called Development Company was up to. Whatever it was had undoubtedly involved A 2 Z, where Bangor Gannett and his renegades had met the stubborn resistance of Pete Ricard, as determined and fearless a top screw as Hoss had ever employed. There had been no apparent way to by-pass that resistance, so Pete and his men had been bushwhacked and strung up. Why? Rustling? There was plenty beef for the taking without recourse to such heroic measures.

Whatever it was these scheming renegades planned, dark fate pointed ominously at those Ganadero cowmen impersonated in the Saddlehorn. Hayhurst, Longmire, Steen and Ruffner. Hoss regretted he had so little chance to warn them. He'd be lucky if he lived to see a lawyer. His only hope was Ruffner, laughing GR Connected boss.

Even in booking Hoss, Gridley had stacked the cards, refusing the name Hoss Greer. Who would mourn John Doe, booked for murdering two railroad detectives, killed while breaking jail or mebbyso taken from jail by a hang mob? Hoss fell asleep.

He was awakened by Gridley shining a lantern in his face, calling him. Whiskey tainted his breath. "Looked in to see how you're doin', feller. Anything you want?"

"Water," husked Hoss. "You was goin' to fetch some, remember?"

"I'll take care of it now." Grinning, the sheriff went out.

Hoss slept again and was soon wakened, this time by Jaxon Zane. "I'm night marshal, Doc," he jeered. "Our accommodations suit you?"

"Go to hell, Zane!" The Tres Alamos man turned his back to the light. The barn man departed, chuckling. Four times, before dawn, they jarred Hoss from sleep, Gridley and Zane alternating the torment. Wearing him slowly down. Hoss, calling upon his legendary patience, waited.

He got no water till sunup, when Gridley fetched breakfast, a good breakfast that Hoss thoroughly enjoyed. Gridley watched his studiously, offering friendly overtures. Hoss simulated appreciation, accepting a cigarette and a light. Then the sheriff came out with it. "We've identified you, feller. Yeah, you're Rutland Orp, renegade pardner of Pete Ricard, A 2 Z ramrod an' our best local rustler. Hoping to verify it, we found Pete absent. Fresh mounded graves looked interesting enough to open. Who you think was in them graves?"

"Rutland Orp," Hoss quipped.

"No, fool. Pete Ricard an' his three cowpunchers. All A 2 Z cow critters was gone. You had killed your pards an' run off with their cattle."

"Looks like you got me," Hoss sighed. "Two detectives tried to stop me. I shot 'em an' stampeded the stole cows over their carcasses. My pony, smellin' blood, pitched me off an' marked me up like you see. Six murders, Sheriff. I confess 'em."

Gridley looked flabbergasted, shook off his surprise and said, "I've ordered this A 2 Z business hushed," he said. "But if it leaks out, with folks already ringy over them murdered dicks, I'm scairt I can't hold 'em back. . . ."

"Lynch law, eh?" Hoss shrugged. "Save an embarrassing trial, Gridley. Don't risk your own skin, holdin' 'em away from me."

"Don't aim to, feller."

"Good. That's settled. Now tell me who's anxious to see me dead an' yet didn't kill me when they had me cold. Huh?"

Gridley blinked. "I don't follow you, Orp. Personal, I'd rather the mob found you'd escaped."

"Can you be thinkin' *ley de fuga?*" sneered Hoss. "Shot while escaping?"

"That's not the price, Greer." Gridley suddenly capitulated, casting aside pretense. "Look! You sign over the A 2 Z an' you'll find this cell open, a gun on my desk an' your bronc out back. Yes or no?"

"Sign over A 2 Z to who, Gridley? You?"

"No. Bangor Gannett. An' if you should report anything beside value received, you'll be tallied by experienced men instructed to get you. Sign the deed an' keep your mouth shut an' this matter will be dropped. Rutland Orp will be listed as at large. If you refuse an' outgun the Syndicate's bushwackers, you'll be dragged back here to face trial for six murders. Call your shot, Greer."

HOSS grinned coldly. This gang didn't know him. Sure, he'd keep his mouth shut. The important thing was to get out of this, with a gun strapped to the thigh. After that, he'd tromp his own snakes. Gridley, Gannett and Zane were the big

he-coons. The rest were flunkies, carefully picked, long rehearsed, fanatically loyal. They had Ganadero under their heels and might own it if they were good enough with guns.

"Simple choice, Gridley," he hummed. "Trot over the papers."

"Good!" Gridley beamed, shaking Hoss' hand. "I told Bang you'd be reasonable." He gathered up dishes, locking the cell door as he left. "Be back in a few minutes with the value received." He winked and went out. Hoss heard him speak to someone in the office, heard the banging of the outer door. Almost at once a commotion arose in the office. Hoss heard heavy-voiced Jaxon Zane. "No, no, I tell yuh NO! He's incommunicado. Nobody can see him yet, not even a lawyer." And, after a low-voiced rejoinder: "I only work here, men. If you can't take my word fer it, go get an order from Gridley. If he says you can see him, you'll see him. Now get out . . . ugh . . . ah . . . look here, Ruffner! You'll never get away with this."

Even then, Hoss couldn't hear the laughing little cowman's soft speech until the door opened and Zane came backing into the cell block, his hands high in the air. Prodding him in the belly with a long-barreled six-shooter was Ruffner. Behind him came a tall, melancholy man in puncher's garb, holding Zane's six-shooters and the jail keyring. Ruffner was like a flea, nothing about him in repose.

"H'are yuh, Greer," he greeted, without shifting his glance. "Me an' Adam Hayhurst decided on comin' down here to see you. Adam, open this cell. That's the stuff. Get in there, Zane! Set down on that cot. Handcuff him to the bars, Adam. Yeah, an' now gag him."

"You'll die fer this." Zane rasped.

"Everybody's gotta die of something. Zane. You don't scare me."

"Don't take the warnin' light, Ruffner," Hoss said. "He means it an' you've stuck your heads into a lion's mouth in comin' to town."

"You're telling us." Ruffner was grim. "They had a welcomin' party waitin' at the ranch, when I got home. Determined cusses, Greer, but damned poor shots. They missed me again. Wish I could say the same for poor Pitch Longmire."

"Get him, did they?"

"From the hill back of his house. He came in on the five-twenty an' had just got home from Denver when . . . . he ain't dead, but bad hurt. The wagon trip to Phoenix won't help him none, but his boys wouldn't wait for the evening train."

They finished with the fuming barn man, locked him in and came over to unlock Hoss' cell. Hoss halted that. "Not that way, Ruffner, please. All you'd do is to hub us a shootin' match against the whole town. We couldn't win. Thanks just the same, boys, but you go on home an' don't stand in any lighted doors or windows. You're on the list to be got. Don't do nothin' till I can work out my deal with Pike Gridley. . . ."

RUFFNER flinched like Hoss had struck him. "A deal with Gridley," he sneered. "I never thought I'd live to see the great Hoss Greer kneel down an' lick the corral dust offa that crook's boots. My mistake, Greer. C'mon, Adam, let's go out where the air don't stink." And when he had reached the door, he fired back. "When Gridley's figgerin' up the cost, Greer, remind him that I wired your lawyers for a writ of habeas corpus. It should get you a better deal."

Then he was gone, laughing that mirthful little laugh. And Hoss sighed. Here in the Ganadero Valley, he couldn't win for losing.

It wasn't long till Sheriff Gridley returned with a shifty-eyed, weak-chinned lawyer who looked hungry. "All set, Greer. Lawyer Snell's drawn up a deed.

You can read it an' . . . . oh-oh, what's this?" He was looking through bars at trussed Jaxon Zane. "It's Zane, one of my deputies. Who put him in there? What happened, Greer?"

"Some gent put him at a disadvantage by flashin' a faster draw."

"Who? Talk up, Greer? Who done this?"

"There you go," charged Hoss. "Askin' me to make Zane sore by tellin' his yarn for him. Unlock him. Take off his gag an' he'll tell you—with flourishes."

And that he did. Hayhurst had gone away with the cell keys, but Gridley found others and unlocked the cell. Jaxon Zane sputtered like a firecracker string, damning Ruffner and Hayhurst, but mostly Hoss who had been only a spectator but who was present as a target for the barn man's vituperation. He charged that the two cowmen had come to release Hoss but had been frightened away by the sheriff's return. He misquoted Hoss, saying the Tres Alamos man had promised he'd work the sheriff to let him out and then he'd clean up the Ganadero. He repeated Hoss' warning not to stand in lighted doorways because the Development Association was out to kill them.

Anger turned the sheriff's face a deep red. "Go get horses an' lead the boys after that pair, Jax. We'll see if they can come in here an' turn a gun on our peace officers. Snell, take that paper back to your office an' hold for my orders. I don't think the prisoner has the proper attitude," he flashed a wicked grin, "yet."

In a few moments the two men were gone and Gridley was taking off his coat. "I didn't get in on that fun last night, Greer. I'll have me some now. Give you black-snake reminder who's boss around here. Impress upon your immortal soul the sin of denyin' the judgments of our syndicate. Start beggin', damn you!"

He stepped out into the office, presumably to get the wicked, loaded whip called blacksnake. Hoss, already a mess from abuse, viewed added punishment with something akin to horror. His brain seethed with crazy plans, all impractical. He regretted now not having kept his mouth shut save to completely alienate Ruffner and Hayhurst. Even that might not have placated the vindictive Zane, who had to take the spotlight off his own failure. Hoss shuddered as echoes of a blow came from out front—like the blow of a lash against the wall. Bootsteps. Gridley was coming back. He paused in the shadowed doorway—without the whip.

"He'll sleep quite a spell, Hoss. I held back, thinkin' Ruffner an' Hayhurst was cuttin' you loose. But when I heard 'em say in the saloon that you'd turned 'em down cold an' was playin' with renegades, I figgered it was time to take a hand. So here I am."

"Anse Constable!" There was a sob of released tension in Hoss' voice. "Bless you, old-timer. Get the keys out of Gridley's pocket an' spring me outa this can."

CHAPTER THREE

Out of the Web

WITH the front door of the jailhouse barred, Sheriff Pike Gridley roped and gagged and locked in a cell, Hoss took possession of the sheriff's weapons and lay down to await the evening and to encourage further repair in his sorely beaten body. Anse, who had found small time for rest, digging graves and burying all that was mortal of his nephew and three A 2 Z cowpunchers, stretched out on a cot and was instantly asleep, snoring lustily. Hoss too might have slept, but there were too many interruptions. Time and again, the door rattled as townsmen called for the sheriff. None was persistent till Jaxon Zane showed up, late in the evening. Zane, having a key, learned at once that the jail was barred on the inside. It

excited him. He almost blew his top.

"Pike," he bellowed. "You in there, Pike? You all right?"

"Go 'way!" Hoss gruffed a passable imitation of Gridley's voice. "I got a splittin' headache. Be out directly. What you want?"

"I overtook Ruffner an' Hayhurst, collared 'em, kicked the fight out of 'em an' taken 'em to Burnt Ranch line camp, under Bottle Butte. Bang's all fer cuttin' their throats. Me, I augered to use 'em as bait to toll Steen under our guns. Your vote settles it. When can you ride out?"

"I'll—damn this headache—I'll be out directly. You wait fer me in the Saddlerock." Zane, too drunk to be keen-witted, pulled away, muttering. The talk had roused Anse, who yawned noisily and flashed Hoss a wide grin.

"So they got Gar Ruffner an' Ad Hayhurst, eh. An' they'll likely have Steen before mornin'. Hmmm! Dunno why I'm consarned, seein' them cowmen has kept me on the run all these years. Even chargin' me with winter kill. But at least they raise beef an' all these buzzards raise is hell with the fires lit. It's yore fight now, Hoss, an' I'm sidin' you because I'm Pete's uncle an' he never tired of tellin' me what a top boss you was to work for. So-o-o, out we go, come twilight, a-shootin' if necessary. You ride to Burnt Ranch. I'll git some men an'—"

"How many men in your gang, Anse?"

The outlaw pulled his chin. "Not many, fer a fact. Ain't had many since Sheriff Art Slayton jumped my boys in Gillard Pocket an' hung all ten of 'em. A hunt for a stray pony saved me that time. I ain't got over five-six right now. An', worse luck, they're on a deal fer wet cattle, below the border. We'll have to play 'er lone hand, Hoss. I'll warn Steen an' mebbyso fetch some of his punchers. You wait for us."

"I'm a poor hand at waitin'," said Hoss, bitterly taciturn.

"All right, cut Ruffner an' Hayhurst loose, no help asked. Like I'd uh did a few years ago. You might have help, at that. Heard 'm talk as they opened up graves I'd just filled. There's trouble in the syndicate, Hoss. Bad trouble. The smell of crooked profits drawed 'em together. The taste of crooked profits is tearin' 'em asunder. It's buildin' up to a finish fight atween Gannett an' Zane on the one hand an' Sheriff Gridley an' his followers on the other. One gunshot might start a beautiful slaughter."

"I won't be gamblin' on that," said Hoss, and he was checking action and loads in the sheriff's guns. In an adjoining cell, Gridley was grunting, straining at his bonds. Anse stood near a window, studying the gathering dusk.

"Another fifteen minutes will do 'er, Hoss," he said. "Now what you think about ponies? Yours is in the feed barn, eh? Little risky goin' after him, don't you think? Mine's in the willers, straight back from here. Yonder's a long-legged bay at the nearest rack. I'll take him. You take mine. An' I'm gettin' all the best uh that."

HOSS grunted, fighting down jumpy nerves. This waiting was hardest. Anything at all, just so he was out in the open, facing action. Way low physically, in a state that would have had most men hospitalized, Hoss stared into the deepening gloom with hungry brooding. At those barred windows, he saw pallid faces, haunting faces long missing from the ken of men, faces that cast a dark spell over his spirit. A far echo of guns jarred his fancy, guns that had branded a gay youth who loved life and laughter, dancing and the scrape of a fiddle. Hoss had donned them as servants. They had become hard masters. The bill could only be paid in blood, and a payment was due. . . .

The light was dim. Anse was on his

feet, gliding noiselessly toward the door. His gun was in his hand as he shot the bolt and peered out warily. "They're watchin'," he whispered. "But I think it's dark enough to chance it. You ease left; I'll slide out on the right. Save the shootin' till another time—if possible . . ." He was gone, silently hugging the jail wall. Hoss followed like a wraith. Across the street and down a ways, someone called, "I seen something move, Jax. Unless my eyes was playin' tricks. . . ."

"That's the trouble," came Zane's voice, from directly across the way. "A man strains his eyes an' soon he sees all sorts uh things. . . ." His boots were pumping across the dusty roadway as Hoss faded around a corner of the jail and headed back. He heard Zane hit the jail stoop and call hoarsely to his partner. "You was right, Boots. Jail door's gapin' open. Looks like Gridley's skipped. Damn the luck. Bang will be fit to tie. Let's get that Greer so Bang can work on him."

Bootsteps. Boots running across to join Zane, following him into the jailhouse. Hoss had passed the sheriff's small corral and stall shed, crossed the small creek beyond and come upon Anse's picketed pony when the gunshot woke echoes in the silent town. A gunshot muted by the heavy walls of the jailhouse. It was followed by Zane's sonorous bellowing:

"Jailbreak! Prisoners is loose! They got the sheriff! Jailbreak!"

Hoss, easing up to the pony and jerking the latigo, vented a grim chuckle. It had been too good a chance to miss, for the Bangor Gannett faction of the Ganadero Development Association. Pike Gridley was dead and, to the uninitiated at least, Hoss Greer was guilty of a seventh murder in twenty-four hours. At least that many killings had come to light in that short period, all legally chargeable to Hoss. Feeling more the hunted man than ever before in his life, Hoss rose to the saddle and sent his pony at a hand lope along the straggling river trail.

WHEN Hoss pulled off the main trail, opposite Bottle Butte, and took the willow lined trace into the creek bottom, most of the shock incident to his beating had passed. The fears that had tortured his nerves in the El Toro jailhouse were things of the past. Hatred of inhuman renegades and a hunger for payoff, these imparted sort of a fool-hardy recklessness to him, yet never had his senses been keyed to greater vigilance. He had calculated the odds, scorning them. His job now was more than just to collect for a bill of goods. There must be vindication, which involved the greater risk.

He crossed the creek after pausing to let his animal drink, and rode up the bank. Yonder gleamed a light. Burnt Ranch. Bangor Gannett's headquarters layout now, but formerly a line camp for Old Tom West's sprawling U Bar. Hoss dismounted, remembering the scandal of Bangor Gannett pistoling Old Tom to death, here at this cabin, the subsequent murder trial with Gannett going free. Three days and two nights, those two had played poker in El Toro. West had lost heavily, supposedly giving Gannett a deed to a metes and bounds parcel of land including Burnt Ranch.

Gannett introduced the deed as evidence. An expert promptly branded it a crude forgery. Gannett claimed he had ridden out to Burnt Ranch with two men to look over his new prize and that Tom West was lurking there. His shot missed Gannett and killed one of his companions. Gannett didn't miss. The prosecution couldn't shake Gannett's testimony or prove their claim that Tom West had been foully murdered elsewhere and his body brought to Burnt Ranch to nail down that forged deed.

These things Hoss was recalling as he tied his pony and went toward the light on foot. The law was one way to handle

something like the Tom West murder case, maybe the best way on the average. But it had failed. The law Hoss intended to employ to judge Gannett could conceivably fail, but seldom had.

As he neared the shack, keeping in the shadows, he could hear ponies squealing and fighting in the corrals. He could hear men talking in low tones, yonder by the hay stack and watering trough. Now Hoss reached a place where there was ten yards of open ground between him and the line cabin door. His hand brushed the butt of his gun as he moved across that dooryard. From the shadow of a Chinaberry tree, a voice said, "Hey, what time is it?"

Nothing subtle about that query. It told Hoss that Jaxon Zane was here, that he had placed a guard to watch for Hoss. The Tres Alamos man wrapped loose fingers about his gun butt. "Shootin' time," he gruffed. "Greer's comin'! Be here in a matter of seconds." Nor did he slow his pace. The cryptic note in that answer held the guard mute and puzzled until Hoss jerked the door open and stood revealed in the light. Then he bellowed, "Greer! Comin' in! Look out!"

A gun flamed, the bullet passing behind Hoss as he stepped into the cabin, chipping the door frame. Hoss slammed the door behind him. He had a fleeting glimpse of six men rising from a round table, men whose faces were suffused with the blood of high anger, whose hands reached for guns. Before them were uncorked bottles, tincups. The room smelled of whiskey, faithlessness—death. Ruffner and Hayhurst lay tied along one wall.

CHAPTER FOUR

Burnt Ranch Smoke-out

AS THOSE six men came up, their angers changed to fears, flashingly. At a glance Hoss catalogued them. There was the man who'd welcomed him to the Saddlerock, a reddish man whose pale eyes glittered venomously. Truly handsome, Bangor Gannett, slim-hipped, broad-chested, even-featured. On his right, resembling him except for visible intelligence, was Jaxon Zane. Between these cousins, ringing the table, were those who had impersonated Hayhurst, Longmire, Steen and Ruffner, in the Saddlerock.

Respectively, they were Rowdy Rapp, brawling bully-boy with postoak arms and hen brain; Cinco Sarko, dark-skinned, venomous, lightning with a gun and black-garbed as if mourning a departed conscience; Poody Giffords, cadaverous slat to whom life's problems were gambles to be bucked according to percentage; and Getty Durgin, jowled, liver-spotted, affecting a frozen smile to shroud his abandoned spirit. These men had been identified to Hoss by Anse Constable.

Hoss, expecting fewer men, was not dismayed. Fear, with him, was always for others. He grinned now, amused by their astonishment and by Rapp's puffed face, bruised by Hoss' fists in the Saddlerock. Hoss caressed his gun butt.

"Set, gents," he drawled. "You're goin' nowhere an' playin' no games till we're done augerin'. We got business to settle. Set down!" The order crackled. They didn't obey. They did nothing but stare. Hoss probed their shallow fear, found it less for himself than for one another. It was a man's cry from outside that pulled them into their chairs, a cry suddenly, ominously choked off.

"My God," murmured Gannett. "What was that?"

Hoss, who thought he knew, capitalized that weird echo. "That's bein' smart, gents, choosin' not to buck a hungry surround like that. Gannett, get out the necessaries to write with on. If you ain't got a pencil, use a bullet. If you ain't got paper, rip off a shirt an' write on that. An' somebody cut the prisoners loose."

"Don't you write nuthin', Bang,"

growled Zane like distant thunder. "You mind what our lawyer said."

"Shut up!" Anger burned away Gannett's fears. A crafty light burned in his pale eyes. "Write what, Greer? What in hell's the state of your mind, here in the Ganadero? What you shootin' at?"

Hoss grinned icily. "Christian charity's a ample garment, Gannett, until somebody starts burnin' bullet holes in it. Now is the time for talk. Gunplay can come later. You're signin' a confession that Hoss Greer had nothin' to do with the murders of Pete Ricard, his three cowhands, them two railroad detectives or Sheriff Gridley. Write it out good an' plain that you done them killin's, or hired 'em done. When you've signed the paper an' handed it to me, I'll give you a chance to go for your guns an' try to get said damaging confession back."

A mirthless chuckle spilled across Bangor Gannett's lips. "An' if I don't care to put my head in a noose by signin', then what?"

"Then," said Hoss, "I'll shoot you down like I would a mad dog, without a bit of a chance."

It made them laugh, and perhaps with good cause. His threat had solidified them again. They were six to his one. Cinco Sarko, Poody Giffords and Getty Durgin, remnant of the leaderless Gridley faction, felt sure Hoss would gun first for Gannett and Zane. They'd let him get in those shot, then they'd drop him. Hoss read their purpose in their eyes like black type on a white sheet.

As for the other faction, Gannett and Zane were losing their fear, regaining their nerve. Rapp, their creature, had known no fear. A thing of rope-like muscles, all he knew was brutal rage and direct action. Hoss saw stubbornness in the eyes of these three, knew he must do without any written confession and the release of prisoners. The will to violence built up and the seven men in the room seemed to hold their breaths and wait for the sign.

A faint scraping came from beyond the closed door. Hoss sensed menace there and moved slightly. And then came a sudden thundering of hoofbeats outdoors, a swift rattle of gunshots and the high, sharp yells of embattled men. All in all, it divided Hoss' attention. Gannett, having awaited that, lifted his knee. Over went table, lamp, liquor, carrying the dissidents, Sarko, Gifford and Durgin, down with the wreckage, plunging the room into blackness.

ROWDY RAPP, in Hoss' book the most dangerous man in the room, bulled into Hoss, wrapped him in powerful arms, carried him crashing against the wall. They fell together, Hoss uppermost. Shock jarred Rapp's hold. Hoss wrenched free, kneed his man and gouged his eyes. Rapp bawled with pain. Hoss drew, chopping his gun into Rapp's face. The man's powerful fingers found Hoss' throat, shutting off the air, digging cruelly.

Hoss tried desperately, unable to shake that clutch. He had hoped to save the cap for the stern business ahead. But, lacking the ability to breathe, he had no other choice but to jam his gun against Rapp's barrel chest and jerk the prong. The bullet stiffened Rapp, drove air from his lungs. He wilted and Hoss could breathe again.

The room jarred, flaming with gun flashes. A bullet burned Hoss' shoulder as he rolled. The Pike Gridley followers were spraying the floor, hoping to kill Hoss and Rowdy too. Hoss fired at those muzzle flares, continuing to roll. Someone screamed, jabbering terrible curses. Hoss came up against one of the trussed cowmen, he didn't know which. His knife was busy and, having cut the man loose, pressed the blade into his hand so he could release the other.

Now the door whipped open, the night breeze slashing in to part the gunsmoke.

On that breeze rode gun echoes, hoofbeats and the shouts of men battling for life. Across that rectangle of uncertain light, Gannett and Zane were suddenly silhouetted, leaping toward the doorway and escape. Zane stumbled and pitched down, slain by a shot from within. Hoss shot at the assassin's gunflash, heard Sarko's cry and his swift exhalation as he died.

Gannett banked his all on the belief the wind had blown the door open. As he cleared the threshold, his gun blazed. Answering muzzle streaks blew him back and down. Writhing in the dust, in the fragments of the empire he'd planned to steal, he cried pitifully, not at all in the manner of a warrior who has well calculated the price of failure and defeat. Over his sobbing, cutting through the din of lessening gunfire, a cracked voice called, "Hoss! Hoss Greer! Where you at, Greer?" That was Old Anse.

Hoss smiled, making no reply though he knew the danger to Anse in his silence. There on his hunkers, he held his breath, waiting. Those who cowered in the dark must have believed him dead. Getty Durgin murmured, "C'mon! If we don't get outa here now, we ain't ever gonna."

"Wait, Getty." Poody Gifford sobbed with agony. "I'm shot. Laig won't track proper. Lemme hang onto you."

"An' be settin' ducks fer them manhunters outside? Hell no. It's ever' man fer hisself now. Make that laig track or give up." He moved toward the open door, sneering at Poody's pleas. Now Hoss had him limned against the starglow. Getty's gun jutted before him, aiming at the figure nearing the open doorway.

"Hoss Greer! If you're alive, sing out!"

Gannett, sprawled almost at Anse's feet, moaned, "Don't shoot me no more, fer God's sake: I'm dyin' . . . shot to rags an' blood. . . ."

Getty's weapon stiffened and Hoss shouted, "Down, Anse! Durgin', drop that iron or I'll—"

DURGIN, on one knee, spun, his gun swinging to Hoss' voice. Hoss, in one of his most bitter moods, laughed as he fired. And, laughing, he was thinking of those four swinging bodies at the A 2 Z, of a score of renegades jumping one man in the Saddlerock, beating him into the sawdust and laying his body across the railroad tracks, of the limp bodies of two railroad detectives. His bullet smashed through Durgin's brain. And Hoss yelled, "All right, Anse. Grab Gannett. Get what you can out of him before he cashes his chips."

Hoss leaped toward Poody, who squealed like a rat as he scuttled across the floor. His gun flamed in Hoss's face, missing. Ruffner piled onto Poody, choking him into unconsciousness. Somebody fetched a lantern. Gunplay was stilled. Horsemen milled out there, yipping like coyotes. Hoss was picking up renegade pistols when they brought Gannett inside, moaning, begging to be saved. "Somebody ride for Doc Rawlins. Kill horses! I'll pay . . . anything I got I'll pay . . . to get that medico here. I'm gut shot. Can't last long. I'll—"

"Hush that caterwaulin'," Anse rapped. "Save yore breath for a confession that will easy yore immortal soul. Who's got

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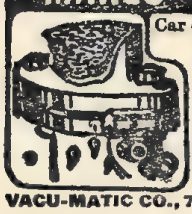

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pencil an' paper, so's we can take down what he's got to say? I want to see how bad he's hit."

Hoss, reacting to the battering, the tension and the fast pace of past hours, felt suddenly all gone. He cast a rueful glance at Ruffner and Hayhurst, who were eyeing him askance, and walked outside, dragging down gulps of air, trying to make a cigarette with trembling fingers that spilled the tobacco. "Here, have one of mine." A man got off a horse, tendering Hoss a pack. "You're Greer, ain't you? I'm Gus Forster, one of three N. A. & P. men to escape the renegade trap. We were onto them, Greer, so they had to kill us. You were elected to take the blame. You've done a good job. I'm proud to shake your hand."

Hoss accepted cigarette and light, dragging down the smoke as he shook the detective's hand. Behind him, Ruffner and Hayhurst came up, offering their hands sheepishly.

"Thanks, Greer," said Ruffner. "You fooled me. I really thought you'd sold out to Gridley. I'm ashamed."

"Me too," said Hayhurst.

"Not at all," said Hoss. "What about Steen? Anse Constable was to warn him. Hard judgment, trusting an outlaw to carry out a job like that."

A horseman detached himself from the waiting cavalcade. He was laughing. "I'm Steen, Greer. I owe you thanks an' an explanation. Always use salt on what Anse tells you. He's one of my trusted hands, since I found it profitable to pension him. We let him brag about bein' wanted in six states, but actually he's a harmless old coot that bawls like a baby when he has to shoot a wire-cut colt or a glandered pony. You sure have renewed his youth, lettin' him work with you thisaway."

Hoss chuckled, thinking how, without Anse, he most surely would have been

killed, the Ganadero a rich plum in renegade hands and Pete Ricard unavenged in an uneasy grave. "I can't tell you," he said fervently, "what a pleasure it's been."

From the line shack came Old Anse, hippering along on hopelessly run-over boots. He splattered a stream of tobacco juice into the dust, pressed a paper into Hoss' hands. "I wrung it outa the coyote," he said, fiercely. "He's only scratched an' here's everything he ever done ag'in' the law, signed by some of the boys as witnesses. Would uh signed 'er myself, only . . . well, you know how it is with us fellers on the off side of the law. Which reminds me. . . ." He drew back skinny shoulders, jerked down his hat. "My boys will be thinkin' I've stopped lead. Gotta get to the hole-up an' ease their worries. Besides, I've bin too long in the open, this caper. New sheriff comin' in an' fust off he'll have a posse out fer Old Anse. Glad to uh met you, Hoss." He shook hands vigorously. "So long Gar . . . Mist' Forster. I'll git down to Gannett's hangin'—unless I hear that owl a-hootin'. *Adios!*"

He ran for his horse, rose to the saddle and spurred away, like the new sheriff might even then be riding out to Burnt Ranch.

Wardell Steen chuckled. "Truth is, Greer, the old feller's sleepy. He'll be sawin' wood in the bunkhouse when I get home."

"If you don't mind," said Hoss, wearily, "I'll go home with you an' help Anse saw up that wood. I'm plumb beat to hell and gone."

And that's what he did. His sleep was sound, too. He'd come to plan one job, had done another and now the Ganadero was a place where men's sleep could be sound and undisturbed by fear or trouble and death.

THE END

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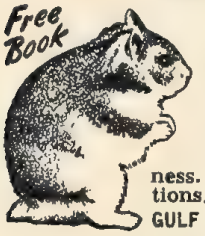

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(Continued from page 89)

yelled for water, water that wasn't to be had in the adobe. He saw Althea dart toward a burlap-covered jug the Thorpes had stored in the shade, just out of reach of where Anson lay. He saw a man rise up to grab her, and then another one.

He stood up and fired until his gun was empty, and then something skated along the side of his head and he was clutching at the wagon wheel for support. It wasn't enough. He kept going down, hearing Althea scream, hearing Ruby's harsh Kiowa jargon.

He knew he was just barked, and would live to hang. All he hoped was that Ruby could get to Althea with that one last shot the old woman undoubtedly had saved. . . .

HE WAS lying in heavy straw somewhere, his bandaged head in Althea's lap. She had on a dress, one of the starched "Christian" ones he bought her after they were married, and she was crying. That was the first thing he knew.

Then he saw a lantern, and he recognized his own little barn. He could hear horses outside, lots of horses. The Walking S was milling around, talking in subdued tones.

He couldn't see Ruby at first, but in a minute she stalked over into the lantern light from the corner of the barn. Ollie Secord was walking behind her. He was wearing a gun but he had shoved it around almost out of reach, for comfort.

He was staring at Althea with an odd look on his face, a yearning, lonely, old-man's sort of look. She glared up at him with hate-filled eyes and spat a curse, and he rubbed his mouth as though what she said hurt him.

Seeing them that close together, Estes suddenly understood a lot of things. Why the Kiowas killed Van Secord, for one.

Althea had the same high forehead, the

same mouth, the same fierce, proud eyes. Her darkness had hidden the Secord look all these years, but seeing them together made it unmistakable.

And Estes saw that Ollie hadn't known, either. Ruby, damned by whites and Indians alike, had kept her own silent counsel.

"I—I almost killed my own niece," Ollie stammered. "My own kin—my own flesh and blood—and I didn't know it. Girl, I want to make it up to you. You're—you're the only one of us left. I—I want you to come over to my house, run it for me, take the place you—"

"I'll see you in hell first!" Althea snarled.

Oh, in time she'd get over it, Estes knew. The blood instinct was strong in her, too. She had the clannish Secord traits, but the Stud H would come first. Not until she could deal with Ollie Secord on even terms would he get a kinsman's handshake from her.

He looked up at old Ruby, discovered she was watching him anxiously, worried about how he'd take this. He smiled. He had never seen Ruby show a smile before. She did now.

(Continued from page 106)

"You mean it, honey?"

"I'll sell out my shop," she answered, and snuggled closer. "And we'll go somewhere for a fresh start. However little you get out of your half of the Square Deal, it's all the stake we need, we don't need any stake, darling, starting out new is stake enough! If I weren't afraid of making a horse-thief of you, I'd say, let's not bother taking this rig back, let's just keep driving to where we're not going to know as much as one sporting man by name."

"Or one red-headed widow," he said. "Or one crooked partner."

THE END

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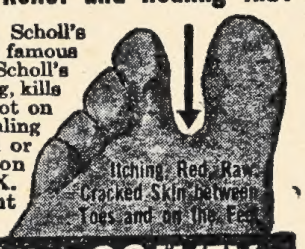

Dr Scholl's SOLVEX

(Continued from page 31)

in the second year of their marriage that the guns roared at Fort Sumter and plunged the nation into war. She could divine, men say, that Iverson thought of that other war and the blocky, red-headed man who had shared his campfires when Mexicans and Americans were battling back and forth across Texas.

She knew the call in Iverson's heart, and she sent him forth to this new war and he knew that he carried the most important part of her with him. And men say that she smiled with infinite understanding when Iverson wrote her there was a blocky, red-bearded man again sharing his campfire. There is more that men tell about the things Iverson and Mason did in that war and about their return to Cocomino town; but that, of course, is another story. . . .

THE END

(Continued from page 81)

up to the camp for help. Danny, she's not coming back. Danny, close your eyes."

Danny did so, and he heard the tearing of cloth, and after a while the girl's tender ministrations as she bound up his wounded shoulder. When she was through she kissed his cheek.

"It's my shirt, Danny," she said. "I had to use it. But I guess it doesn't matter—if—"

"If?" Though she was only a voice, she seemed more real than any woman he had ever known.

"If what Lucybelle said is true, you don't need to keep your eyes closed any longer."

"I don't know what Lucybelle Lee said."

"She said you were in love with me. She said it was plain as a knob on a door."

"Lucybelle's a great kid," Danny said. "Come here, Mrs. Trash."

THE END

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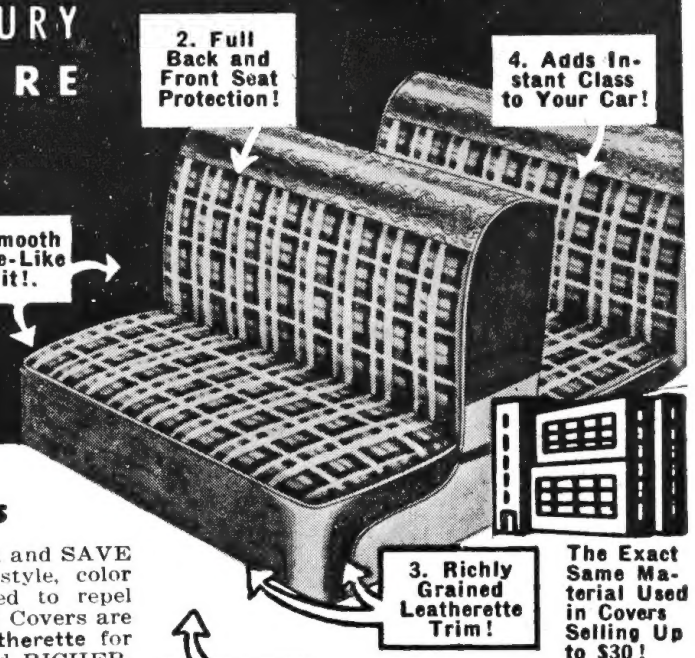
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